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March 25, 1890.

No. 661.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXVI.



IN BREATHLESS SUSPENSE KIT BANDY AND SINGING BIRD STOOD IN THEIR BOATS, THEIR EYES RIVETED UPON THE STEED
AND ITS FEARLESS RIDER.

Old Kit Bandy's Deliverance;

OR,

BANNER BEN,

THE WILDFIRE of the PRAIRIE.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "WHIP-KING JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

OLD COMPASS, THE COWBOY.

THE sharp, pistol-like crack of a whip mingled with the clatter of hooved feet startled the half-score of miners, gamblers and bummers that were lounging in the Sun-Dog, the principal saloon of Roaring Rocks, an isolated mining-camp in the mountains of Southern Colorado.

Rushing to the door the crowd saw a horse-man dressed in the garb of a ranchero go flying down the street, driving before him four long-horned, panting steers, whose sleek hides fairly glowed in the October sun.

"Old Compass, the cowboy, by heavens!" exclaimed a brawny miner, "and Roarin' Rocks is rescued from starvation. Boys, Old Compass said he'd bring us some beef and he's did it. 'Rah for Old Compass!'"

"Boys," called out another miner, "let's drink to Old Compass right away, and then go down and help slaughter the Texans."

As one the whole crowd floated back to the bar, and Old Roman Nose Jack, the proprietor of the Sun-Dog, set out the liquor.

"Here, boys," exclaimed Baldy Bill, holding aloft his glass, "is to Old Compass, the dandy cowboy."

"And here's to the fun he always affords us whenever he looks in on we mossbacks," added Old Steve Redrow.

The crowd drank and then entered into a discussion of the old ranchero's merits and demerits, his eccentricities and rollicking good-nature, and while thus engaged, who should come striding into the saloon but Old Compass himself.

Not over half a dozen of the crowd had ever seen the old man before, and those who had not, laughed outright in the man's very face, at the odd and serio-comical expression of his weather-beaten visage and ungainly proportions.

He was a man not far from sixty years of age and stood over six feet high. He was slender as a racer, with long, ungainly limbs, large hands and feet, a long, high head, large ears, a very prominent nose and wide mouth. The suit he wore fit him snugly and showed off his form in all its ungainliness. His feet and slender legs were incased in a pair of high-topped boots, at the heels of which were enormous spurs. A wide-brimmed hat, or *sombrero*, surmounted his head, slouching almost to his shoulders. In his hand he carried a whip with a short stock and long, snakish-looking lash. At his hip hung a big revolver, while just above the top of each of his boots peeped the buckhorn handle of a knife.

No odder specimen of humanity than Old Compass—a name suggested by his long legs—had ever been seen in Roaring Rocks before; nor was the presence of any one hailed with more pleasure than by those who had chanced to meet him there a few times within the past year.

"Hullo, boys!" the old fellow exclaimed as he entered the saloon; "still wrappin' yer carcasses around tarantula milk, eh?"

"How're you, old pard?" shouted Baldy Bill, advancing toward the old ranchero; "you're the folks we rejoice to see. You're comin' has saved Roarin' Rocks from starvation. Old Compass, we worship you!"

"It's yer stomache, Baldy, that ye warship, and not me; but ye don't know it," responded the old cowboy, good-naturedly. "I know as what I'm handsome and stately as a statoo, but I'm no celestial angel, and don't keer, Baldy, thank you, if I do wind myself around a mug or two o' Roman Nose's ten-year Kentucky B'urbon. My throat's real arid."

Baldy Bill took the hint and called out the drinks. Old Compass tossed off his glass with a gusto, and went on with his conversation.

Meanwhile other persons were dropping into the saloon. Some of them were strangers who had just arrived in the camp, on the weekly stage; but, as strangers were constantly coming and going, no particular notice was given any

one unless he presented some striking peculiarity.

After Compass had entertained the crowd by a recital of his ride to camp with the four steers, he called for a second drink, and then turning to the crowd said:

"Boys—men o' Roarin' Rocks, I'm on an innocent little tear to-day, and I want you to indulge me. Them steers brought me jist fifty dollars apiece in cold, hard metal. I'm to have half o' it to squander on the poor o' Roarin' Rocks. It's true, I haven't see'd a deck o' cards since I war up here two months ago, but I want some innocent little fun, and am willin' to pay for it; but, don't disremember that I'll amuse my man the best I know how. Do you understand?"

"You want to put up on a neat little game o' poker," said Baldy Bill.

"You catch on, Baldy, like a burr to a broncho's tail," answered Compass; "and now, are there any quiet chaps in all this vast throng that will amuse me with an innocent little game o' poker?"

"I'm a stranger here," spoke up a man in the crowd, "but I always like to please people. I'll accommodate you to a game, sir."

The accommodating stranger was a man of perhaps forty years of age. He was a little above the medium hight with a figure perfect in its physical developments. He had a steel gray eye, a square, full face, a massive, protruding chin and a heavy, silken mustache. His dress was that of the sport, but there was a look in his eyes, and an expression about his mouth, that belied him if he was not a shrewd, cunning and desperate man.

"Wal," said Old Compass, facing the man, "who be you, stranger? Give me an interduction, please."

"Thomas Shalon's my name; I just came in on the stage," replied the man; "and if there's anything on earth's broad breast that I love it is such little amusement as you suggest you are craving."

"Glad to agitate your paw, Thomas," said the old ranchero; "my name is Josephus Haas—Joe for short. I'm no spring chicken, neither am I an ancient rooster. But I love innocent little sports, and have some accomplishments. In handlin' a cow-whip I don't take water for any hulk 'twixt Manitoba and Mexico. I'm beautiful with a lasso, sublime with a rifle, serenely serene with a pistol, and inspirin' as a poem on spring with a bowie. But with keerds I'll confess I'm as a toddling child; but then I'll give you a little whirl, Mr. Shalon, just as becomes an old man like me as is here on an innocent little tear."

The two seated themselves at a table and the game began.

The crowd gathered around them to witness the playing. The sympathy of the Roaring Rockites was with Old Compass, of course, though every one naturally expected to see the old ranchero lose his money in a few minutes, for, on previous visits there, he had demonstrated the fact that he knew very little about cards, and lost his money every time he bet. On the other hand, all felt satisfied that Tom Shalon was a card sharp without any scruples.

But, contrary to the expectation of his friends, Old Compass won steadily from the first, and finally he staked his entire pile and won on a single hand. As he reached out to take the money the face of Shalon darkened, his eyes flashed, and in a threatening tone he exclaimed:

"Hold on, there, old man! You can't come that game! I'm no tenderfoot, Josephus Haas!"

"What do you mean, man?" demanded Old Compass, his hand still resting on the money.

"You cheated, sir!" declared the man, fiercely, savagely.

"I deny the allegation point blank!" retorted Old Compass.

"Then you mean to call me a liar?" said Shalon, reaching for a pistol. "Old man, you don't know me, sir, but I will now inform you that I am Captain Blood, the Mountain Outlaw!"

"Indeed?" replied Old Compass, without the slightest evidence of surprise as he gave his arm a quick shake, when, as if by magic, a cocked derringer glided into his hand from his sleeve and covered the desperado's heart; "and it's apparent you don't know me; I am Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

CHAPTER II.

A CORNERED DESPERADO—ASSASSIN SHOTS.

THE crowd in the Sun-Dog was almost paralyzed by the startling revelations of the two poker-players. The name of Captain Blood, as well as that of Kit Bandy, had long before preceded his coming; and the very thought that

they stood in the presence of that desperado was sufficient to fill them with terror. No doubt they would have fled the place had it not been that the intrepid Old Kit Bandy had the drop on the outlaw.

The very fact that the bandit had dared to make his presence known there, when he stood alone, was evidence of his desperate character. It had long been a favorite amusement of his to enter a strange camp, raise a row, present a pair of revolvers, and making himself known, put to flight those around him; then, mounting his horse, to flee to the mountains before the terrified miners could recover their senses and give chase. The outlaw, however, had been cautious enough not to repeat this bold exploit in any one place, and in Roaring Rocks, a drowsy little camp, he least expected to meet with danger on his first visit. But he had reckoned without his host. He little suspected that the gaunt, ungainly ranchero was the peer of any man in the West in physical strength and courage, until the man had announced his name and presented his credentials in the form of a cocked derringer.

Although Blood's hand was upon his pistol, he dared not draw it, for he knew it would be his death-warrant to even attempt it. Bandy had the "drop" on him. He was cornered at last.

Old Kit was the first to break the stillness that followed the revelation of the two card-players. Looking into the outlaw's eyes, in which burned the fire of a subdued tiger's, he said:

"Don't dare to pull that pistol, Capt'n Blood, or by the horn o' Joshua! I'll put a thirty-eight-caliber hole through your bosom in a flash. Know ye that I'm quicker on the trigger than bat yer eye. You're my mutton, ole hoss."

This speech sufficed to break the spell that had bound the spectators in dumb silence, and they all began to fall back from the table and sidle off toward the door with a view to a safe place should bullets begin to fly.

Captain Blood did not deign to reply to Old Kit, but his lip curled with scorn. He returned Kit's gaze without flinching, and while this battle of eyes was going on, the lithe figure of a smooth-faced man glided into the room and to Blood's side, and quicker than a flash—before any one could realize what was up—snapped a handcuff around the desperado's right wrist.

With an oath the outlaw sprung to his feet, and turning on the little man flung him aside as though he were a mere infant, and then endeavored to strike him down, having shifted his pistol to his left hand.

But no sooner was Blood upon his feet than Bandy was upon his, and, raising his fist, he drove it like a thunderbolt against the outlaw's cheek, knocking him sprawling upon the floor.

As he went down Blood discharged his pistol, but as it was at random nobody was hurt. Quickly regaining his feet the desperado fought with all the desperation of a demon—striking and shooting right and left, the handcuff dangling to his wrist cutting through the air like a whip of iron.

Bandy and his active little friend at once discovered that the man was a giant in strength. They could expect no assistance from the miners, for they were fleeing as fast as their feet could carry them from the scene of action.

Bandy could easily have shot the outlaw, but there was a price on the villain's head alive far greater than if dead, and so to bring the struggle to a speedy close the old detective seized a long-necked bottle from the bar, and dealing Blood a blow over the head felled him to the earth completely stunned. And before the Mountain Outlaw had recovered his senses, he had been handcuffed and disarmed.

"A big haul, Ichabod Flea," said Old Kit, addressing his little friend, who was, indeed, the inimitable and cunning Ichabod Flea.

"So 'tis," responded the latter, "but he's gamey as a speckled antelope."

As soon as it had become known that the Mountain Terror was a helpless prisoner the frightened miners and bummers began to file back into the saloon to look upon the chained desperado. And when they found that he could no longer harm them their fears turned to vengeance and they began to cry out for the blood of the prisoner.

"Cowards! poltroons!" hissed the outlaw, defiantly, "you can talk bravely enough now, but you may yet have a chance to try your mettle. I'm not the only one of the band of Mountain Wolves. Remember that."

"Shoot him! knife him! hang him!" issued from lips in the turbulent crowd gathering about.

"Men of Roarin' Rocks," said Old Kit Bandy, stepping to the side of the prisoner, "this man is my prisoner, and I warn you not to harm him while in my charge."

There was a desperate earnestness in the old man's tone that for the time quelled the spirit of the disorderly mob.

The outlaw was kept under guard at the Sun-Dog. As soon as it was dark Old Kit and Ichabod intended to slip away with him from the mob and carry him to the place where most wanted.

The news of the villain's capture spread like wildfire through the camp, and by dark the saloon was packed full, while scores of men were gathered outside swearing by all that was good and bad that Captain Blood should never leave there alive. To make good their oaths they proceeded to organize, and as soon as Bandy learned this he went into the little apartment curtained off in one corner of the saloon where Blood was seated in charge of Ichabod Flea and said:

"Captain Blood, I'm afeard the jig's up with you, old boy; Judge Lynch is organizin' a court, and you know what that means, I reckon."

"Hasn't Kit Bandy, the great detective, influence enough to save me from a mob?" asked the outlaw, in a tone severely sarcastic.

"They're wild—crazy—mad. Some o' them say you killed their friends at this place and that they're going to settle accounts with you."

"Bandy," said the outlaw, leaning forward and whispering to the detective, "mind what I tell you: if you permit them cowards to lynch me you'll lose the best clew and the best witness you will ever find in the case you have been at work on so long—I mean the Hampton Crime and Conspiracy!"

Kit Bandy started. His face as well as his actions betrayed his surprise and astonishment.

"Horn o' Joshua!" he exclaimed, "what do you know 'bout that affair, Blood?"

"More, perhaps, than you might think."

"A party to the crime, eh?"

"Yes—no," replied the outlaw; "but my life's worth something to me—the secret to you. Of course, I know, and so do you, that a crime and conspiracy are only suspected—not known to be a fact."

"But since you have spoken as you have," said Old Kit, "I am satisfied it is a fact and that you know something about it."

"Very well, make the most of it, Kit Bandy," was Blood's indifferent reply.

"Convince me that you do know something of that Hampton case, and I will save your life at the risk o' my own," declared Bandy, earnestly.

"I'll do it, sir," answered the outlaw, "for more reasons than one, though I will not explain any that you do not already know. In the first place, I'm going right back to the very start: Some years ago there dwelt in Kentucky two very wealthy men, Israel Ashmore and Adam Hampton. These two men had grown up together, been educated at the same school, married at the same time, and settled down upon adjoining plantations. Their lives and fortunes seemed to run in the same channel. They accumulated wealth rapidly, and it seemed a bright future was before them. But the tide finally turned. Israel Ashmore's wife died, and in less than a year Hampton was a widower. Ashmore was left with a single child—a son; Hampton also an only child—a daughter, whose name was Jessie. But say, Mr. Bandy, am I on the right subject, do you think?"

"Yes, yes," replied Kit, impatiently, "go on, captain, go on."

"Well," the outlaw continued, "both Ashmore and Hampton conceived the idea of uniting their great fortunes, and undertook to betroth their children, Harry Ashmore and Jessie Hampton, who were about eighteen and sixteen years of age respectively. The children already seemed to think a great deal of each other and consented to the betrothal. But to make sure that their wish was fulfilled, the fathers willed their property, each to his own child, so that they came into full possession of all providing they married before Harry was twenty-three years of age. In case they did not marry by that time half of Ashmore's property was to go to his half-brother, Gerald Smedley, while half of Hampton's was to go to his dead wife's brother, Randolph Darnley. Two years after the making of these wills Ashmore died, and, strange as it seems, Mr. Hampton followed him to the grave a few months later.

"The estates were managed by the guardians of the boy and girl. Harry was in college, and some time after her father's death Jessie Hampton, who was a pretty, romantic girl, took it into her head to go on a summer's visit with old friends residing in Northwestern Kansas. The name of this family was Raymond. They had formerly lived in Kentucky, near the Hamptons, and Jessie had become devotedly attached to Betty Raymond, a girl of her own age. During that very summer, while Jessie was with the Raymonds in Kansas, occurred the Sappa Valley massacre by the Cheyenne Indians. The Raymond home was laid in ruins, the family were all killed, and of course it was supposed that Jessie, too, had fallen a victim to red-skin brutality. Search was made for her among the Cheyennes, for some thought her great beauty might induce the red-skins to carry her away a captive; but this search proved fruitless, and all hopes of ever seeing her again died out of her guardian and her betrothed."

"But after nearly a year had passed who should turn up at her home in Kentucky but Jessie Hampton! But, alas! she was so horribly disfigured that even Harry Ashmore could not recognize in voice or feature a single trace of her former self and beauty. Her story of her deformity was this: At the time the Cheyennes made their raid upon Raymond's place, she and Betty Raymond escaped to the prairie and concealed themselves in a field of tall grass. The Indians fired the prairie, and unable to escape from the flames, she and her friend were caught therein. Betty Raymond was burned to death, and Jessie fell in the flames, unconscious. And there where she fell she was found the next morning by an old hunter named Rule. Finding she was not dead he took her to his dug-out, and there tenderly nursed her back to life. But for months she laid between life and death. Not another soul came to or was seen about the dug-out during all her convalescence, and when she was able to travel the hermit hunter took her to the nearest military post, which was over a hundred miles distant, and gave her into the care of the commandant, who returned her to her home in Kentucky with the hunter's story of his finding her and her long months of suffering."

The poor girl's mind was almost shattered by the ordeal she had passed through and the condition it left her in. She was really hideous in her deformity. To her lover she seemed almost repulsive, and the great hope of their fathers seemed in a fair way to remain unfulfilled. The only thing about the unfortunate that Harry recognized was a heavy gold ring that he had given her before she went away on her visit.

"But within a year or two Harry Ashmore got it into his head that the disfigured girl was an impostor—that the true Jessie was the victim of a conspiracy. His suspicion grew out of some trifling remark the disfigured girl inadvertently made one day in his hearing. Her guardian did not share his suspicions, but the more Harry brooded over the matter the stronger became his conviction that the girl was not Jessie Hampton. Finally he concluded to make some investigations. He visited the scene of the Indian massacre, the post commandant who had sent her home, and sought out Old Rule, the hunter, and most important witness of all. But he couldn't find Rule, nor had he ever been heard of since he left the fort. The disappearance of the hunter seemed a little singular—in fact, strengthened Ashmore's suspicions of foul play."

"Finally, he laid the case in the hands of the Mountain Detective Association, which, in turn, handed over the case to you, Bandy, to investigate. You see I have given you the details of the case whether you do or do not know them; but, admitting—or supposing—you do, do you think I know anything about the case which is entered at head-quarters of the Detective Association as 'The Great Hampton Conspiracy'?"

"By the horn o' old Joshua!" declared Old Kit, "I should hum that you'd had an inklin' o' the case; but you haven't reached the bull's-eye o' the matter yet. Do you know whether the disfigured girl is an impostor? and if she is, do you know what became of the true Jessie Hampton?"

"I do!" Blood answered, promptly; but they were the last words he ever uttered, for, at this instant, a hand clutching a bulldog revolver was thrust through a rent in the curtain that separated them from the wrangling mob outside, the weapon was discharged, and a murderous bullet crashed into the temple of the outlaw.

With a moan he fell forward, dead, at the feet of the old detective.

With a muttered curse Kit Bandy sprang to his feet and rushed out into the main room. The place was dimly lighted and filled with two-score of excited men, all of whom were now crowding in the direction whence the pistol-report had come.

"Who fired that assassin shot?" thundered the old man, his eyes sweeping the crowd around him.

No one answered him, but every eye was at once focused on the face of the old detective, whose tall form towered a head above those around him.

Soon the news of Blood's death was announced, and then the crowd became frantic with joy.

Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea made their way out into the open air, and when alone, Flea said:

"Kit, that was as foul a shot as a coward ever fired. But I spotted the vampire that I suspect o' the deed. I came out into the main room when Blood began his story, and I saw a man standing near the curtain. At first sight I mistrusted he was eavesdropping, but went away. I'm sure o' one thing, however, and that is that the man wore false whiskers. But I did not see him fire the shot, nor did I see him after the shot was fired. But I'll wager my interest in the Sandy Desert that that man was listenin', and that he, whoever he was, fired the fatal shot."

"Then, by the horn o' Joshua! he killed Blood that the secret of the Hampton Conspiracy might remain a mystery—might never be known to Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy. And that assassin, Ichabod, is the man we now want, and by yonder silver moon, by them blinkin' stars and them hoary-headed hills, that man we will have or—"

Here the old detective's speech was cut short. There was the flash of a pistol in the deep shadows of the building near which they were standing, and with a sharp cry of pain the old man staggered backward and fell to the earth.

Just then the moon, as if in very shame, hid her face behind a cloud, and Ichabod Flea, kneeling beside the body of Kit Bandy, called aloud for help.

The old detective had been shot down by the hand of a lurking assassin!

CHAPTER III.

BEN BANNER, THE YOUNG WILDFIRE.

A WIDE, grassy valley, trending away toward the northwest. The silvery Arkansas quivering in the October sunlight as it crept softly through the great vale. Little clumps of trees, gorgeous in their autumnal robes of scarlet and gold. A herd of a thousand or more buffaloes lazily lolling in the valley. Flocks of small, dusky birds sporting in the air above the shaggy herd. In the distance a prairie-dog village whose frisky little denizens seemed all aglee. Cowardly coyotes skulking on the distant hills. Over all, the weird and dreamy haze of a glorious Indian summer.

And this was the scene presented to the gaze of three horsemen who had drawn rein upon the crest of a hill overlooking the valley, and while they are feasting their eyes upon it we will introduce them to the reader.

The first to claim attention was a youth about eighteen years of age, though his physical developments were those of a man. He was of medium height, somewhat slender and straight as an Indian. He had a well-shaped head, a rather prepossessing face, sharp blue eyes sparkling with the spirit of boyish exuberance, a rather prominent nose of the Roman type and a mouth around which seemed to play the rippling smiles of a rollicking, devil-may-care sort of a youth. Dressed in the suit of a border ranger and scout, armed with rifle, revolvers and knife, and mounted upon a clean-limbed and well-caparisoned pony, his general appearance did not belie his character, for this youth was the noted Banner Ben, the Young Wildfire of the Prairie—noted as a scout, a skilled hunter and rifleman. No more fearless boy rode the prairies than Ben Banner, or Banner Ben, as he was better known.

The oldest of the other two horsemen was a man of perhaps two and twenty, with a fine, robust figure, pleasant brown eyes and a manly and intellectual face. He, too, was dressed in the buckskin of a hunter, yet it was quite evident that he was only an amateur sportsman. He answered to the name of Harry Ashmore.

The third horseman was also a young man of about two-and-twenty, dressed like the others, was well armed and, judging from his gen-

eral appearance, had the courage to use his weapons if need be. His name was Bob Burch, and he was the boon companion of Harry Ashmore.

As the trio drew rein upon the bluff and glanced over the landscape, Banner Ben exclaimed:

"Great jee-whangs! there's your panorama, boys! How d'ye like that for Arkansaw scenery?"

"It's grand, glorious!" exclaimed Harry, in exuberance of spirit.

"Cherubimic!" added the Young Wildfire; "don't it look like a section o' paradise?—a chunk o' the hunter's glory? There's buffaloes till you can't number 'em. Oh, but we'll have swogs o' fun, boys. We'll take them critters right along with us and have a frolic all the way to Bloody Fork. Don't I wish that old Greek tulip, Tom Rattler, was with us now! It'd do your soul good to hear him reel off language. He has a multiplying 'tachment to his talker, and the way he can spin off yarns beats a hull dog-town of chatter. But then, he's as jolly old soul as ever raised a laugh, downed a buffalo or good-a-fied an Injun, and if we survive the fun o' the promised buffalo chase we'll be with the old pilgrim by night. But now, boys, in order to git a little bulge upon them bison we've got to ride back a ways, descend into that holler, and then enter the valley so as to keep yon belt o' brush between us and the buffs. Then we can reach the river unseen, cross over, stiffen our backbones, tickle our ponies a little, and away we go down on the game a-flying—pop—bang—bellow—smoke—hoofs and horns! Oh, but we'll have miles of cherubimic fun!"

"Will it not be wanton sport to shoot down scores of the noble beasts and leave them to rot on the plain?" asked Burch.

"Boy," answered Banner Ben, with a smile, "you're too gentle and dovish ever to be a hunter. Do you see them kiyotes languishin' on the hills 'way over yander? Do you know they're dyin' o' starvation? No, there'll be no buffaloes wasted, for every blessed kiyote over there can crowd a hull buffalo carcass inside its skin, hoofs and horns included."

"Poor Old Rattler!" sighed Burch, a smile hovering about his lips, "if he's a greater architect of worm-fence assertions than some folks I know of still in their 'teens,' I pity him with all my heart."

Turning, the three rode back along the trail they had come, descended into a deep defile that led them out into the river valley.

The herd of buffaloes was on the opposite side of the river, but, by keeping a long belt of timber that fringed the stream between them, the hunters succeeded in reaching the river, which they managed to ford with but little trouble. Then Ben gave his friends some instructions in chasing the buffalo, took the lead, and away they went at the top of their animals' speed.

The wary game was on the alert, and in a few moments the whole herd was sweeping up the valley, the very earth trembling under their frightened tread.

Into the cloud of dust raised by the flying hoofs dashed the young hunters, and soon the crack of their revolvers was mingled with the thunder-like roar of feet; and above all, the clear clarion voice of Banner Ben could be heard ringing out in peals of wildest glee.

Away up the valley thundered herd and hunters, a black cloud of dust hanging upon the air like a pall as if to shut out from view the work of the wanton destroyers.

Instinctively the coyotes drifted down from the bluffs and gathered for a feast on the trail of death.

For over five miles the young hunters kept up the chase, but at length Banner Ben called a halt.

"Isn't that enough, boys?" he asked, as the three reined in their ponies.

"A plenty—a multitude," answered Burch.

"But shall we not secure a supply of fresh meat?" asked Ashmore.

"By all means," replied Ben; "it's not fur to the Forks now, and we may have to lay in wait in' there several days, so we'd better take a supply o' buffalo meat."

So saying, they rode back to the first dead buffalo and dismounted, and then Ben proceeded to skin the desired game. This labor occupied but a few minutes, but before they had secured the meat upon their ponies their ears were greeted by the pounding of distant hoofs.

Quickly Banner Ben started, his keen eyes flashing with a new fire. He glanced back down the valley. He saw the shadowy outlines of a score of horsemen riding swiftly up the valley through the settling cloud of dust. For a few

moments he kept his eyes upon them, then turning to his friends, exclaimed:

"By jee-whangs! boys, them horsemen are Injuns!"

"They can't be hostiles, can they?" asked Bob Burch.

Before Ben could reply a wild, demoniac war-whoop burst from the red-skins' lips, almost chilling the blood in the amateurs' veins.

"There!" exclaimed Banner Ben, "does that sound cherubimic? Is there anything dovish 'bout that hyena yawp? Boys, they're a gang o' Old Stooping Bear's warriors, and they're after scalps. Kids, mount and tickle your ponies for all there is in them. We'll run first and fight last, seein' as what them devilonians has ten to one nearly."

Leaping into their saddles the trio put spurs and galloped away, taking the nearest cut toward the river.

This was a turn in affairs unexpected by Ashmore and Burch. They had no desire to encounter hostile Indians, although their young guide, Banner Ben, had promised them a variety of adventures and sport when they set out on their ramble ten days before.

Ben, himself, was not expecting danger from the red-skins in that part of the country. He knew that Stooping Bear's followers were hostile, but as they were a long ways from the Indian village he was not thinking of red-skins. But the lad was no novice in Indian-fighting. He fully understood the red-skins' savage, blood-thirsty nature, and knew that to fall into their hands would be sure death.

Ben could easily have outridden the foe had he been alone. His pony was one of superior speed and endurance. Those ridden by Harry and Bob were no matches for it; but Banner Ben would not desert his friends, notwithstanding, he saw that the enemy were gaining slowly upon them.

The young hunter had quickly conceived the idea of dodging the enemy among the clumps of trees and bushes along the river, or else ford the river and seek the cover of a large body of timber on the opposite side.

As the race continued Ben unslung his rifle and made ready for fighting on the run, if fight he must.

"The very first smoked hellonian that comes in reach o' my 'good-a-fier' 'll git tapped for blood," the brave boy declared.

But before an opportunity for a good shot had been offered they reached the river. To their surprise they found themselves in a sharp bend, and to still add to their precarious situation, they discovered that the opposite bank, up and down the stream, was high and perpendicular. So to retreat from the bend or cross the river and escape danger was equally impossible. But in looking about for some way out of their dilemma, Ben's keen eye caught sight of a goodly sized bateau lying at the water's edge but a short distance from them. To whom it belonged he did not inquire, but leaping from his saddle he exclaimed:

"Boys, there's a boat! Jump and run for it! It's our only show now to escape from them hellobulluians!"

Ashmore and Burch leaped from their saddles and started with Banner Ben toward the boat. A buffalo trail cut the bank gradually down to the water's edge and the boys had just reached the point in this where the path began to dip downward when four villainous-looking white men, one of whom Banner Ben recognized as a notorious outlaw named "Jaguar Jim," sprung from a clump of bushes at the side of the path and leveling their revolvers upon the youths, Jaguar Jim commanded:

"Halt! you young thieves, or we'll splatter your livers all over this country! Ha! ha! Banner Benjamin! you sweet and kitteny cherub, you're corralled at last—you're our meat!"

Without a word the dauntless boy threw up his hands and his friends followed his example; but the next instant the young plainsman dropped forward with the quickness of lightning, touched his hands upon the earth and then whirled himself through the air as if shot from a mortar. Banner Ben's feet, as they came over, were planted squarely on the breast of one of the outlaws and, with such violence, that the villain's neck cracked like a pistol.

Flat upon the earth as if struck down by a thunderbolt fell the outlaw, while over on him whirled the agile form of Banner Ben—once more touching his hands to the ground and again shooting forward through the air—over the bank and into the river with a defiant yell.

"Curses on the slippery little devil! I'll shoot him and have done with it!" stormed Jaguar Jim, running to the edge of the bank. But just

as the villain caught sight of the boiling waters where Ben had gone down beneath the waves, he felt the earth sinking beneath him and with a cry of baffled rage he sprang backward. The next instant tons of the bank on which he had stood caved off and with a thunderous splash fell into the river at the very spot where Banner Ben had gone down under the waves!

CHAPTER IV.

A STARTLING SURPRISE.

A DIABOLICAL laugh escaped the lips of Jaguar Jim as he again advanced to the edge of the bank and looked down into the agitated river.

"That fixes the young greyhound of the prairie, thank the good, kind fates!" he exclaimed. "I guess he'll never git out from under that mountain of dirt with any wind in him. Ha! ha! ha! But, by the Saints in Utah, I'm afraid the infernal brat flung his heels into Kendig's breast and broke his neck."

He advanced to the victim of Banner Ben's superb and wonderful handspring, and found the fellow motionless in death, bleeding at the mouth and nose.

The fury of Jaguar Jim knew no bounds, and he would no doubt have wreaked a bloody revenge on Ashmore and Burch had not the Sioux arrived on the scene at this moment.

The Indians were led by a white renegade whom Jaguar Jim recognized at once and greeted with the familiarity of an old friend.

"Hello, Eagle Nose, my esteemed villain-friend," Jaguar said; "I am truly delighted to see you at this time, for I want to show you and them red hyenas at your back how graceful I can play a tenderfoot."

"Where's Little Devil?" asked Eagle Nose, after running his little snakish eyes over the crowd and its surroundings. Little Devil was the red-skins' name for Banner Ben, for whose scalp they longed more than that of any enemy they had.

"He's in the bottom of that murmuring stream under ten feet of earth and stone," answered Jaguar Jim; "the bank fell in on him after he'd jumped into the river. But, eternal curses upon him! he did all the mischief he could: he kicked the life plumb out of Kirt Kendig."

"Why didn't you shoot him?" asked the renegade chief.

"Shoot thunder! could you shoot a streak o' lightning as it went flying through the air like that boy? I'll swear he flew so fast that my eyes even couldn't foller him. Humph! shoot nothing," and Jaguar Jim seemed thoroughly disgusted.

Eagle Nose turned and imparted to his warriors the news imparted to him by the outlaw. A look of disappointment clouded the red-skins' faces, for they had felt certain of Little Devil's scalp; and to assure themselves that the young pale-face had not escaped the falling bank and was hiding along the water's edge, they dismounted and carefully searched the banks up and down the stream. But no trace of him could be found, and so they turned their attention to Ashmore and Burch, and for the first time in their lives the young amateur hunters began to realize the savage cruelty of an Indian. They were securely bound to a couple of trees and then subjected to taunts and blows and the terror of knives and tomahawks whirling about their heads.

While they were thus engaged another person arrived upon the scene. He was a white man of perhaps thirty years of age, with a swarthy complexion, a heavy black mustache, a sharp black eye and long dark hair. He was dressed in a suit half-savage and half-civilized. He was well-armed and mounted upon a handsome and mettlesome steed. Jaguar Jim and Eagle Nose advanced to meet him, the latter saying:

"It is White Medicine, the last person I expected to meet here, but I am glad I have."

"Doctor Gwynn," added Jaguar Jim, "shake, old friend, for I'm glad to look upon your handsome face. You're looking remarkably fresh and happy. From whence comes thee, doctor?"

"The camp of Roaring Rocks," replied the man, "but who's that lying there?"

"Kirt Kendig—kicked into eternity by that boy fiend, Banner Ben, but the imp overshot his mark and landed himself in eternity by the river route."

"Is that a fact, Jim?"

"The holy truth, Gwynn," declared Eagle Nose.

"Then there are two of your pestiferous enemies gone."

"Who's the other?"

"Kit Bandy, the mountain detective."

"Great Peter! say it again, doctor. Is it possible? Tell me who slaughtered him that I may

move a vote of thanks. Where and when, and how was the deed did?"

"He was shot in the dark on the streets of Roaring Rocks a few nights ago. No one knew who did the shooting for it was all done under cover of darkness; but as I left camp a few minutes after the killing they may have found the killer before this."

"Just so," observed Jaguar Jim, facetiously. "I kind o' catch on as to who did the good work."

"But I have some bad news for you as well as good, Jim," Doctor Gwynn said. "The death of Bandy was preceded a few minutes by the death of your leader, Captain Jubal Blood."

"Great Moses! that can't be, doctor!" cried Jaguar Jim.

"It's so, Jim; he entered the camp in disguise, or rather under an assumed name, got into a dispute with an old ranchero called Old Compass, undertook to stampede the house as he did last week at Poverty Flat and Buzzard Bend by simply announcing his name; but Old Compass proved to be Old Kit Bandy, and before he knew it Captain Jubal Blood was in shackles. Along in the night Blood was killed while he and Bandy were closeted alone in a little room."

"Well, great terrors!" exclaimed Jaguar Jim, "if this isn't a bad deal for the White Wolves, I don't know what is. Did you mistrust any one of the shooting, doctor?"

"I half mistrusted Bandy himself; but if he did the deed he'll not repeat it again this side of judgment day. But, Jim, his death places you in command of the White Wolves."

Jaguar Jim became somewhat moody and thoughtful, and finally he and Doctor Gwynn stepped aside and conversed in low tones several minutes. The prisoners, Ashmore and Burch, were evidently the subject of some of their talk, for as they turned to rejoin their friends, Gwynn was heard by Ashmore to say:

"You'd better keep them until Redtop George comes. He may be able to identify them."

Shortly afterward the doctor and the Indians took their departure, taking with them the prisoners' horses, leaving the prisoners and their weapons with the outlaws.

Kirt Kendig was buried where he had fallen on the banks of the river.

Then the party sat down to await the coming of some one. The day passed away, and just about dark the party expected put in an appearance in the person of an old and most villainous-looking outlaw called Redtop George. And his coming was hailed with joy. He seemed to be regarded as an important personage for some reason or other.

After a short conversation with Jaguar Jim, he looked the prisoners over, but whether he recognized them the prisoners had no means of knowing.

But finally Redtop George turned to Jaguar, and said:

"By the way, Jaguar Jim, I saw the light of a camp-fire on the other side of the river in the woods as I came down. It was 'bout a mile above here, and I think it'd be a good idea to make a reconnoiter in that direction."

"It certainly would, Redtop," affirmed Jaguar, "and that at once, too. We don't want to run any risk until the rest of our band has joined us, or we have joined them."

By this time it was quite dark and the hazy atmosphere had thickened almost into a fog.

Concealing their outfit and captured weapons in a clump of bushes the four outlaws took the prisoners into the bateau that lay near and embarked for the opposite shore.

At a point half a mile up the river, where the bank was low and the shadows of the overhanging trees deep and black, the boat was run ashore and partly beached.

Redtop George and two of his friends at once set off to make the desired reconnoissance, leaving Jaguar Jim to guard the prisoners.

They had been gone about an hour when the report of fire-arms came from up the river. The outlaws had evidently got into a fight, and the prisoners could see that Jaguar Jim was sorely uneasy about the fate of his friends.

The sound of the conflict lasted but a few moments, and then the silence that followed was fraught with the most painful suspense to both the prisoners and their guards.

This lasted for nearly an hour when the sound of footsteps was heard approaching. Jaguar Jim challenged the party and received this startling answer:

"It's me, Redtop George, and the very devil's to pay, Jim."

"What now, Redtop?" asked Jaguar.

"We got into a fight with some kind of an

outfit up the river in the dark, and both Long Tim and "Yorky" are down—wounded. Yorky got a shot through the shoulder or breast and I expect he'll die, if he isn't dead before now. About ten rods from him lies Long Tim with a crushed thigh and can't budge a peg. He also got a clip across the head which I tied up and come in for orders. I brought their shootin'-tools with me. Shall I tote the boys in or we go up to them?"

"It'll be safest to bring them to the boat and cross back to the other side of the river. I've a notion to shoot them prisoners and go with you, Redtop."

"No, hold to 'em awhile yit, Jaguar; I'll bring the boys in, dead or alive. I told 'em to hang to the willows and I'd be back."

"All right, Redtop; get in before dangers multiply around us. I hope the boys are not so bad as you think."

Redtop at once started off up the river. He was gone over an hour, finally returning with a limp and lifeless form in his arms, which he deposited in the bottom of the bateau, saying:

"Dear me! there's poor Yorky's body and he's leader'n Moses."

A frightful oath escaped Jaguar Jim's lips. The villain seemed greatly discouraged and disheartened, as well as infuriated.

"I swear, Jaguar," Redtop said, "Yorky shall have a decent burial by Kendig's side, and his death avenged! But I'll now go for Long Tim and then we'll git out of this."

So saying, Redtop George again departed, and stepping into the bateau Jaguar Jim essayed to look upon the face of his dead friend, but the darkness was so intense that he could see nothing, and so taking one of the prisoners' blankets he threw it over the body and then stepped back upon the beach. While seriously meditating over the situation and the death of his friends, his ears were greeted by a groan. He listened. He heard heavy footsteps and knew that Redtop was approaching with Long Tim, from whose lips issued a low groan at every step.

Advancing, he relieved the almost exhausted Redtop of his burden, and as he laid the form of his wounded friend in the bateau he said sympathetically:

"This is devilish cruel luck, Tim, isn't it?"

Nothing but a low groan of agony answered him.

"Bear up, Tim, the best you can," Jaguar Jim continued, encouragingly; "we'll cross back over the river to our supplies and there dress your wounds. A drink of old rye will help you to bear your pains."

Long Tim kept up a series of low groans. He sawed the air with his long arms and kicked out lustily with his well leg making it a little uncomfortable for those around him.

Jaguar Jim and Redtop entered the boat, and seating themselves pushed off from the shore. As they moved out into the water Long Tim suddenly gave Jaguar Jim a drive in the breast with his heel that sent that worthy flying overboard into the river. And then, the next instant, the wounded man sprang to his feet and drove his fist with a resounding thwack into Redtop's face, when he, too, went overboard upon the head of the floundering, sputtering Jaguar Jim.

The prisoners, after the boat was out from the denser shadows of the shore, could see the outlines of the outlaws and the spasmodic movements of the wounded Tim, and they made up their minds that the man had gone mad with pain. When they saw him take up an oar they shuddered, for they expected to have their own skulls crushed with it by the madman. But to their infinite surprise and joy he seated himself and drove the bateau down the river, leaving the two men floundering in the water.

Something like a suppressed laugh fell upon the prisoners' ears. It seemed to come from the lips of Long Tim. The situation was quite a puzzling one, and Harry Ashmore was in the act of speaking to the madman when the latter ceased raving, and leaning forward said, in a low tone:

"Men, brace up, for deliverance is nigh. Be you bound?"

"Yes, hand and foot," responded Harry, almost dumfounded by the action of the man; "but you are not Long Tim—who are you?"

"No, I am not Long Timothy, but I managed to insinuate myself into his place, and thereby saved the labor o' walkin' down here to rescue you folks. But who be you, anyhow?"

"My name is Harry Ashmore, and—"

"Harry Ashmore, o' old Kentucky?" broke in the stranger.

"Yes, but what do you know about me?"

"I know haydoogins 'bout you, boy."

"Who are you?"

"My name's Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy—Old Kit Bandy fur short."

CHAPTER V.

KIT BANDY REBUKED FOR SLANDER.

HARRY ASHMORE and Bob Burch could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

"What!" cried Harry, "you Kit Bandy?"

"Me Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective."

"Why, we heard to-day that you'd been killed—shot dead in Roaring Rocks camp over in the mountains."

"Not a word o' truth in it," declared the old man, "and, what's more, I can prove it's a lie outen whole cloth. But let me liberate you, boys."

He arose, and reaching over, cut the prisoners' bonds, then he shook hands with them, and having resumed his seat, broke into a low, chuckling laugh.

"Well, really, this seems a little like a mystery," declared Harry. "I can hardly get the situation through my head—can't see how you could fool those outlaws so cleverly."

"That's part o' my business, boys, to fool people—specially villains. My wife Sabina alers said I was the dad-burnedest fool in forty-seven precincts. But it occurred this way: I was in camp up the crick, and all to once I heard firing a short ways off, and made a rush in that direction for some fun. But the firin' ceased and I stopped. Just then I heard footsteps approachin', and I challenged the unknown. The crack of a pistol and the whiz of a bullet was all the answer I got, but the way I did lam lead into that thicket was a caution to the natives. And I downed my man—shot him in the thigh. How he did howl! I laid flat on the ground and heard the fellers talkin'. I heard Red Top tell Long Tim that he'd report at the boat where Jaguar Jim had the 'two captives' in custody, and if Jaguar said so, he'd come back and carry him—Long Tim—and Yorky, the feller that got shot in the first fight, to the boat. While he was away I took care o' Long Timothy and laid my own lovely form, clad in Timothy's jacket and hat where he had laid them, and—well, here I am. The intense darkness had more to do in gittin' me through than the metallic substance in my face. I know it war mean to deceive a man the way I did, but I couldn't let sich a good opportunity slip. I thought I'd die for wantin' to laugh when that poor fool Redtop came lugging me through the woods, panting like a worried steer and sweatin' like an April shower. This poor cuss is leader'n the mother o' Adam; but when we git to light I want a squint at his face. I want to find somebody that I know—don't care whether he's dead or alive. But now, men, as we drift in our gondola down this classic crick, give an account o' yourselves."

Harry Ashmore briefly recounted their adventures of the past few days, and when Old Kit had learned of the tragic death of Banner Ben he was deeply moved. The old man in a half-choked voice talked over the brave and daring youth's merits—his bravery, his skill as a plainsman, and wild, impetuous spirit.

While the trio were thus talking the moon arose above the tree-tops and cast a soft, weird light upon the river. For the first time Harry and Burch now had a partial view of the face of the noted Kit Bandy, and both of them had to shake hands with him again.

"I see, Mr. Bandy," Harry at length said, "that you have your head bandaged."

"Yes, lad, for the forty-thousandth time since I became a married man," replied Kit, with apparent seriousness.

"Are you a married man, Kit?" asked Bob Burch, in surprise.

"Was, but am a fugitive now, and I know you wouldn't blame me if you could see me in the daylight. I tell you, by the horn o' Old Joshua, that I'm the worst banged-up, marred and disfigured critter that you've seed since you looked upon the map o' Europe. If it war light enough I could show you on my head there a regular coral reef whar my wife Sabina saluted me with a club. Over here on this side is a Mount Horeb bump where a flying dog-iron, catapulted from 'Bina's hand, done its cruel work, and on this cheek is a devil's gorge where a toy tomahawk flung by 'Bina's little hand went in sock to the eye. Oh, I'm a wreck—a perfect ruins o' Babylon, the destruction o' Herculaneum, the downfall o' the Roman Empire. Gallons and gallons o' Bandy blood has quenched the thirsty old earth thro' 'Bina's patriotism in pouring out loyal blood on the altar o' her coun-

try. But I thank the merciful Fates that my troubles with her have ended, even if I do wear a bandage on my head from her last tap."

"You have left her then?" remarked Harry, believing every word the old man had uttered was the truth.

"No, she run off with another man," replied Bandy, "and there's where I got the wu'st slash o' all. The very man that 'loped with her I loved as a brother. He'd broken bread in my house a thousand times; we'd slept under the same blanket often; fought side by side on many a hard-contested battlefield. But he's welcome to her, the delectable old buccaneer. Maybe you've heard o' the man that old 'Bina eloped with? His name war Old Tom Rattler."

"Old Tom Rattler, the hunter?" exclaimed Harry.

"Exactly—the very same sinner."

"By the Great Rosycrusians! Bandy, I deny the allegation and defy the alligator!"

These words were uttered by a strange voice—a voice that came from under the blanket that covered the supposed dead outlaw, and the next instant the blanket was flung aside, and the hitherto motionless figure rose to a sitting posture, and thrusting a revolver into Bandy's face, exclaimed:

"Take that slander back, Kit Bandy, or by the holy pocus, I'll add a Hoosac Tunnel to your song o' lamentations."

"If it isn't Tom Rattler, may I never see daylight again!" exclaimed Old Kit, in profound astonishment. "Back she goes, Rattler, of course, you owdacious old fraud. Put up that pop, and give me your hand, you dear, rascally old impostor!"

The two old friends clasped hands and shook them, and laughed until the bateau fairly danced on the water. Then Old Tom Rattler, having shook hands with Harry and Bob, with whom he had met before, turned back to Bandy, and continued:

"Kitsie Band, you're as big a warper o' the truth as you were years ago. The approach to the grave doesn't improve you a bit, does it?"

"Can't say as't does, Tom," responded Kit; "but I see *you* are improv'n'. There's no deception 'bout you, oh, no! Didn't play dead outlaw for an hour for pure, rectified cussedness. Tom, you're a gigantic embezzlement, and I'd give a hoss to 'a' known it war you under that blanket and heaved you overboard."

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed Rattler, "Kitsie, it seems from your talk that the very same motive that prompted you to take that other outlaw's place and git lugged to the boat, actuated me, also; but I never dreamed that you war in this country till I heard your dulcet voice in the boat. I was just making ready—bracin' my nerves to open on the outlaws when you broke loose. But I'll forgive you this time, Kitsie, for lyin' on me, but, woe unto Jerusalem! if you ever unload your twisters on me again. And so Banner Ben is dead?"

"Yes," answered Ashmore.

"Poor, brave, desperate boy!" Rattler sighed; "but, Bandy, what does thisingin raiding down here mean?"

"I don't know; I am sure the military folks don't know anything about it, and so I s'pose it's a little raid throwed out as a feeler preparatory to a big raid. But, boys, s'pose we go ashore there and camp for the night. I've a hull kit o' fightin' tools up there in the woods I want to get in the mornin'."

To this all assented, and pulling in to shore they landed on the very spot where the amateur hunters had been captured. Here they went into camp; the outlaws' effects, which they had left there concealed in some bushes, were appropriated for present needs.

Finally Old Kit and Harry seated themselves and entered into conversation.

"Mr. Bandy," said Harry, "it has been nearly a year now since you began work on the Hampton Crime and Conspiracy, and I never heard whether you had struck even a single clew or not."

"I've struck one, and a big one, too, and that but a few nights ago; but before I had the matter secure it slipped through my fingers. I'd captured Captain Jubal Blood, the outlaw leader. He seemed to know all 'bout the particulars o' that crime, but before he could finish his story some son-of-a-gun shot him dead. I'll alers believe, too, that a friend o' Blood's killed him to save the secret, and that the same assassin tried to swat me a few minutes later, and 'd 'a' succeeded if my skull hadn't been thicker'n a Guinea nigger's."

"Then the man who shot Blood was on this very spot to-day," declared Harry, "for he admitted, by inference, that he was the man that

laid you out. He went away with the Indians who called him White Medicine—the outlaws called him Dr. Gwynn."

"Oho!" exclaimed Kit, "then I'm on the right trail; that's the feller I want now and, have him I will. But, Harry, how goes things in Kentucky? Have you detected anything further to confirm your belief that that disfigured girl is an impostress?"

"Nothing since my case was given to you, for I have kept away from her. Her guardian has been trying to trip her up on her game, but she is sharp as a tack. She seems possessed of the power of reading one's very thoughts."

"It's a strange case," declared Kit—"beats the famous Tichborne case in England."

"I wouldn't care at all for the money involved," Harry went on to say, "but, Mr. Bandy, I loved Jessie Hampton, and I do not believe my love would have changed for the true Jessie even though she had come back to me disfigured for life. I believe that it is love's intuitive instinct that detected the impostor in the claimant, and turned me against her as something loathing."

"Boy, there's haydoogins o' sound philosophy in your theory o' the heart's keenness o' perception, and since my talk with Blood, the outlaw, I believe a great wrong has been done you and your sweetheart, and that there is an attempt bein' made to defraud somebody out o' a fortune, and it may succeed for all I know."

"In less than a year the terms of my father's and Jessie's father's wills must be complied with, or at least a million and a half dollars' worth of property will go to others than Jessie and I."

"And them others must be the ones that are trying to keep you from complying with the terms of the will, by running in the disfigured girl after she'd been trained to perform her part. Now, I understand that one of the heirs named in your father's very singular will is his half-brother, Gerald Smedley. Where is he? I never understood."

"He lives in Tennessee, and is himself quite wealthy."

"And Randolph Darnley, Mr. Hampton's brother-in-law, is named in his—Hampton's—will as an heir, should Jessie fail to comply with the terms of the will by marrying you. Now where is he?"

"Mr. Darnley is dead, but he has heirs—children that will come into his inheritance. Two of them are sons. One is a well-to-do lawyer in Kentucky and the other a physician in St. Paul. The third one is a daughter, last heard of in Chicago five years ago."

"Did you ever see the son of Darnley that is a physician?" Kit asked.

"Never, to my knowledge, did I see Dr. Calhoun Darnley nor his sister Pauline. Jackson Darnley, the lawyer, I have met."

"Boy," said Bandy, "has it never occurred to you that Dr. Darnley, Dr. Gwynn and White Medicine are a trio that might be traced to one individual, and that one, Calhoun Darnley, is chief conspirator against you and Jessie, if there be any conspiracy at all?"

"Such a thing is possible, though it seems hardly probable," replied Harry Ashmore.

"There'd be nearly a million in it for him," said Kit.

"I have always mistrusted the friends of the disfigured girl, whoever they may be. I don't care for the money. I never expect to see Jessie alive, but it would be some consolation and satisfaction to ferret out the facts and bring the conspirators to justice."

"Harry," said Kit, "don't despair, for I'll swear I believe I'm on a pretty plain trail, though it may end in the river. Blood's story and untimely death, White Medicine's talk here, and his departure with the Indians, are all straws, and to-morrow morning I shall point my nose in the direction o' Stooping Bear's camp."

Various topics incident to their surroundings were discussed by the party. About midnight Old Rattler went on guard and the others laid down to rest.

Wrapping his blanket around him, Harry Ashmore laid down at the foot of a large tree not many feet from the grave of the outlaw, Kirt Kendig. His talk with Bandy had so wrought upon his mind that he could not sleep. Several times he fell into a doze from which he would start with a feeling of unknown horror. Finally he arose to a sitting posture and leaned against the tree under which he had lain. He was in the shadows, and yet the moon had so shifted in the heavens that the light fell full upon the newly-made grave of the outlaw.

This mound was the first object that met his gaze, and he started as it did so—started with a

shudder of horror, and his eyes became fixed as if upon some dreadful sight.

He sees a ghostly object lying upon the earth at the foot of the grave. *It is a trunkless human head!* It sits upright on the fresh earth. The face is turned toward him. It looks ghostly in the moonlight.

Harry bites his lip to assure himself he is not dreaming, for as he continues gazing at the object he recognizes the ghastly face. *It is that of Ben Banner, the Young Wildfire of the Prairie!*

CHAPTER VI.

A HAPPY SURPRISE.

SICK at heart Harry Ashmore turns his head and closes his eyes to shut out the ghastly sight before him. He can scarcely believe but that he is dreaming, and yet he can hear the heavy breathing of Old Kit and Bob Burch, and the gentle murmur of the river hard by, and even seemed to hear the beating of his own heart—all of which tells him that a stern reality stares him in the face—that the ghastly object is the trunkless head of Ben Banner!

But how had it come there? Had it been placed there while they slept by an enemy as a warning to them? And if so, where was Old Rattler, their guard? Was his head, too, lying somewhere in the shadows to be revealed by the shifting moon?

These and a dozen more questions flash through Harry's brain; he is so horrified that he fears to speak lest his voice start a hundred lurking horrors from the surrounding shadows. The strain upon him is terrible, but he finally resolves to arouse his sleeping friends and rises to his feet. As he does so a twig snaps under his foot and almost instantaneously he sees the head of Ben Banner disappear—sink down into the earth!

"By heavens!" Harry mentally exclaims, shaking off the spell that held him in its demon's grip, "there is some mystery there and I shall solve it."

He drew his revolver and advanced to where the head had disappeared. He saw a dark hole in the earth at the foot of Kendig's grave. He started as a thought flashed through his mind. He quickly measured with his eyes the distance between the grave and the bank where Banner Ben had leaped into the river. It was not over fifteen feet. A hopeful light beamed in the young man's eyes, and stooping over until his face was near the hole in the earth, he called out:

"Ben—Banner Ben!"

Then he listened, but all was still as the grave. Again he calls out a little louder:

"Ben—say, Banner, are you alive?"

"Is that you, Harry?" came a sepulchral voice from the ground.

Harry could scarcely repress a shout of joy, but mastering his emotions, he replied:

"Yes, it is I, Harry Ashmore, and I thank God that you are alive, Ben. Come out, can't you? The coast is clear. Bob and I are all right again, and Kit Bandy and Old Rattler are both with us."

"Jee-whango! that's glorious news," came from the hole; "then I'll crawl forth and ag'in take up my cross."

As he concluded, the head of Ben Banner popped out of the hole, and after some twisting and digging the brave boy came forth well and unharmed. But he was a rather sorry-looking sight, being covered with dirt and yellow clay from head to foot.

"My dear, brave young friend," cried Harry, grasping the boy's hand; "thank God you live, for we have mourned you as dead!"

"Well," replied Ben, his youthful face aglow with triumph, "I had to rustle for my life awhile there, Harry. But, you see, the bank fell over me instead o' on me, and so I bobbed up close against the foot of the bank where it caved off. Of course, I was still covered all over in water and loose dirt, and had to pump like sixty to git wind enough to run my works, but as soon as I found the outlaws wer'n't hunting me I began to burrow for more comfortable quarters and soon I was curled up under there like a young bear up for winter. I could just hear the sound o' voices but couldn't make out what was said, and at last, when they'd become still altogether, I began to dig a tunnel up slaunchways through the bank with my knife. While borin' away, what should I strike but some loose dirt—then a pair of feet. Whew! but that sickened me. I soon found they war a man's feet and knew he'd just been buried; but guess how I knew it wasn't yours or Bob's feet."

"I couldn't to save me, Ben," replied Harry.

"Why, I knew if it war you or Bob, the out-

laws wouldn't 'a' gone to so much trouble," Banner explained.

"The dead man was the one you kicked to death when you shot over into the river."

"Jewhango! is that so? But say, Harry, where's Kit Bandy and—"

"Here, by the horn o' old Joshua!" came the old detective's voice, and at the same moment he strode from the shadows and grasping Ben's hand, continued: "I'm dumfounded, boy, God bless your dirty face! I laid in the shadders there and listened to your story, and I now proclaim that you're the Banner Boy o' the West."

"What's up here now? has Kit Bandy taken one o' his asylum spells?" asked a voice from the shadows, and then Old Tom Rattler appeared upon the scene.

"No, Rattler, you festive old buccaneer," answered Kit. "I'm only welcomin' Banner Benjamin back to earth, as you'll be welcomed in Tophet when you leave this earth. Come for'd, Rattler, you superstitious Bedouin, and agitate the boy's hand."

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Rattler, in astonishment, "if it isn't Banner Ben, I'm an old sinner! Why, boy, you young, untamed tempest, I'm as glad to see you as I'd be to hear poor old Bandy even whisper a truth before he dies! Whar on yearth ye come from? You look as though you'd been walled by a cyclone."

Again Ben narrated his adventure and escape.

"Do you hear that, Kit Bandy?" asked Rattler, when the boy had concluded. "Say, old man with the lamentations, whar's the boy that ever hopped that can beat our Wildfire Ben? Show me the old ganglin'-legged detective that ever dreamed o' doin' sich deeds as our Boy Epidemic here goes through with every day as a musclefer! But, Banner Benjy, I'm hallalujerous glad to see you alive again—so Mosaic glad to greet you that I don't know which end's up hardly."

"So fur as brains is consarned it don't make much difference, Tom Rattler," suggested Old Kit, with a chuckle.

"Not when 'sociatin' with you, Kitsie, especially," rejoined Rattler; "but now, boys, the missin' cog is in posish, and won't we make it epidemic-hillfrish for the red-rinds and outlaws? Won't we ladle out purgatorian passports to the varlets with the prodigality that Bandy dispenses double-staked-and-ridered worm-fence stories to them as don't know he's an antipodal foreigner to the truth? Won't we sweep like an untamed tempest down on—"

"Zip-bang!"

It was the passage of a bullet close to Rattler's ear, followed by the crack of a rifle on the other side of the river that cut short the voluble old hunter's words, and the next moment the five had vanished into the shadows of the grove, while all became quiet as the grave save the gentle murmuring of the river and the far-off chattering of coyotes.

CHAPTER VII.

PAWN-EYES AND SINGING-BIRD.

By the time Jaguar Jim and Redtop George had reached the shore and got their lungs sufficiently clear of water to speak, the bateau was not only out of reach, but out of sight, also, in the darkness.

"Fiends and furies!" gasped Jaguar Jim; "what does this mean, Redtop?"

"I s'pose it means that I, Redtop George, am a heroic idiot!" was the other's self-convicting answer, as he rubbed his half-broken jaw where Bandy had "tapped" him. "Do you know, Jim, that that last fellow I carried in from the woods was Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, instead of Long Tim?"

"Holy furies! you don't say, Redtop!"

"Yes; I recognized his voice, for, after he'd upset me, he spoke in his natural voice. I'll never forgit his yawp, for Kit Bandy once got me an appointment for five years in the employ of the Government for lookin' at some mail matter once."

"Then Gwynn's story of Bandy's death was an uncolored lie."

"It was a mistake, at any rate. I don't believe that old imp will ever die. I don't believe he could die if he wanted to. I believe he's the original old devil himself."

"If he was mistaken in Bandy being killed maybe he is, also, in Captain Blood being shot. But, George, to make sure you toted in that old purgatorian, let us hurry up the river and look for Long Tim."

"All right, Jaguar; but I don't expect to find poor Tim alive."

The two discomfited villains arose and started

off up the stream. They finally came to the scene of the conflict, and after hunting about for an hour or so they not only found Long Tim's body, but that of Yorky also.

This discovery threw Redtop George into a perfect fit of rage. His eyes fairly glowed in the darkness with passionate fury. He cursed Bandy, himself and the darkness. Turning to Jaguar, he hissed out:

"Jaguar Jim, knife me! I deserve to die, and you're a coward if you don't kill such a hopeless idiot as I am! Both of them bodies I lugged to the boat were enemies', though I am sure the first one was dead. Curses on this gloom! It's the devil's own friendly cover! I'll never hear the last of this."

"Redtop, a most ridiculous and unfortunate blunder has been committed, but if you'll keep quiet I'll say nothin' 'bout it, for it will bring me in with you. Now, I'm heartily in favor of gittin' away from here. This place is unhealthy—it's cursed."

"Where shall we go?"

"To Standing Rock and join Bracelets and the other boys. There's no use in our foolin' around here now. If it proves true that Jubal Blood is dead, I will take up his fallen mantle and carry out the scheme he has been working on of late. Then the White Wolves can share the proceeds equally, but we have first got to get the girl out of old Stooping Bear's clutches, and that, too, without his knowing it, before we talk of proceeds. Come on, Redtop."

Acting upon Jaguar's suggestion, the two at once set off toward the mountains.

"This would be a pretty spectickle to the eyes o' men and gods," said Redtop, in evident mortification and disgust, "to see we two great 'White Wolves' sneaking away like whipped and ducked curs, without an available firearm, with three friends left behind dead, while all the satisfaction we have had is in seein' one nimble-heeled runt of a boy drowned. Jaguar Jim, you and I both have the reputation of being fertile-brained liars, but can we both concoct a story out of our adventures down here and the death of our three friends, that'll add luster to our fame as White Wolves?"

The two villains could talk of but little else than their inglorious defeat as they trudged along through the darkness.

Without a moment's stop they journeyed on all night, and about sunrise next morning they came to Standing Rock in the mountains, where they found a party of six friends encamped in a canyon, or rather in a densely-wooded pocket of the canyon proper. The leader of this party was known as Bracelets, who was the very picture of a shrewd and cunning desperado. Around each of his wrists was an iron bracelet—the remains of a pair of handcuffs with which he had, at some time, escaped from an officer of the law. The chain had been removed, but the bracelets he left on his wrists, taking as great pride in them as a maiden in her jewels.

The party furnished the two tramp "Wolves" some breakfast, and after their repast they held a consultation. Jaguar Jim and Redtop succeeded in covering themselves with glory in the lie they told of their adventures and loss down the river. The news of Jubal Blood's death was confirmed by Bracelets' party, one of whom had seen the captain after he had received the fatal shot.

Finally the next move was discussed. All agreed in doing their utmost to carry out a great scheme, whatever that was, that had been conceived by Jubal Blood. The outlaws were on friendly terms with Stooping Bear, the Sioux chief, and his followers, and yet it seemed necessary for the success of their plans, that they must invade, either stealthily or in the guise of friends, the precincts of the Indian village. And when there, the successful accomplishment of their plans was of such a character as to incur the savage vengeance of the Sioux, should they be detected in their villainy. To escape this danger was the point most in discussion, and while it was still under consideration they discovered a party of fully three-score savages moving up the valley in the direction of the Sioux village.

"That's Panther Tail and his followers, by the saints!" exclaimed Jaguar Jim.

"As big a lot of red and white cut-throats as ever skulked in these 'ere mountains," declared Bracelets.

"But while they are our friends they're the Sioux' mortal enemy," observed the crafty Jaguar, "and can't you see where we could make them useful? Having to operate against Stooping Bear's camp and confidence, we might throw all blame onto them renegades and outlaws. What say you all; shall I hail them?"

"Yes," was the answer of all. But they did

not have to hail the red skins, for the lynx-eyed guide, a few paces in advance, discovered the presence of the outlaws in the "pocket," and at once called a halt and all joined their white friends.

Panther Tail was an outlawed Sioux Indian—as cruel and merciless a savage as ever went unhung. His followers were mostly Indians made up of various tribes, and, like himself, outlawed. There were a few American outlaws and several Mexicans in the party. All were well-armed and mounted, and the crafty Jaguar Jim had not talked with Panther Tail five minutes before he had wormed from the chief the admission that he—the chief—was then going on a horse and cattle stealing expedition to Stooping Bear's camp.

These outlaw red-skins remained in the canyon until the middle of the afternoon, and when they moved on, Jaguar Jim and his friends accompanied them.

About an hour of sunset they encamped back in a wooded defile about three miles from Stooping Bear's village. This was to be their base of operations, and scouts were at once sent out to reconnoiter the situation, note the surroundings of the village, and ascertain the exact feeding-grounds of the Sioux's horses and cattle, and their number.

Jaguar Jim and Panther Tail, restless spirits that they were, could not remain idle, and so finally strolled off up the river in the gathering shadows of early evening.

They were all of a mile and a half from the Sioux village when their ears were suddenly greeted by the low, plaintive notes of a female voice engaged in singing.

Quickly the outlaw and savage crouched in the shadows with both eye and ear on the alert.

The voice of the singer seemed to come from out on the river, and carefully parting the bushes the two listeners looked out over the water. Both gave a slight start as they did so. In the middle of the stream they beheld a bark canoe drifting at the will of the current. It contained two occupants and both of them were females—dusky Indian maidens, dressed out in all the quaint, barbaric finery and jewels of princesses of royal blood. Panther Tail noted this fact with manifest joy, while Jaguar Jim feasted his eyes upon them with the expression of one in doubt on his face.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the chief, in an undertone, his little snakish eyes glittering like beads of fire, "must be Stooping Bear's girls."

"By murder! Panther Tail, that's a splendid pair," whispered Jaguar Jim, "but I do believe one o' them's a white girl stained up like a red-skin. Look close, Panther, and tell me what you think 'bout it."

"Guess you right—one sing like bird in tree white girl. Ingin girl Stooping Bear's daughter—me rather have her than all the Sioux cattle, all Sioux ponies—break Stooping Bear's heart—then Panther Tail be happy—me take her—white man take white girl."

"I've got two wives now, Panther, but still I wouldn't mind takin' that gal a prisoner if we could get a hold of 'em. I think she is no other than the very girl that we wanted to git away from Old Stooping Bear. Whew! isn't she a charmer on a sing?—Ah! by tophet! see there! they're heading this way. Mr. Tail—and the outlaw nudged the barbarian in the side, "your squaw is coming right over here into your arms, you old beauty."

True enough, the maiden, whom Panther Tail had said was an Indian, and who handled the paddle, turned the canoe toward the shore, wholly unconscious of the presence of those two human tigers lying in ambush on the bank.

When they came nearer the shore Jaguar Jim could easily see that one of the girls was a white girl, though her skin had been colored to a nut-brown. Both were girls of exceeding beauty of form and face. Neither one could have been over eighteen years of age. Their dress, although in Indian style, was of bright and artistic colors. In their dark hair and around their necks and arms were flashing jewels and great strands of various colored beads and tiny shells.

As they approached the shore and their charms, beauty and grace of form and feature became more perceptible to the outlaws, the villains' eyes glowed with a covetous, sensuous fire. Panther Tail, standing upon his hands and knees, his long, black hair falling about his face in snakish locks, was the very picture of a human devil.

In a very few moments the maiden's boat touched the shore a few paces below the ambushed outlaws. Then the girl's singing ceased, and rising, she stood erect in the boat. Above

and below them the bank was fringed with a dense growth of short willows that drooped over the water. A vine loaded with scarlet berries had run out over the tops of the willows and the red cluster hung temptingly before the eyes of the maidens. In fact, it was the sight of these scarlet berries that had drawn the girls ashore, and while the Indian girl steadied the canoe the other thrust her hand up among the foliage to pick the berries. As she did so her wrist was seized in a grip like that of a giant, and then she was lifted bodily from the boat and dragged up, through the willows and vines to the bank where she found herself in the power of a brutal-looking outlaw—Jaguar Jim.

The girl gave a warning cry when first seized, but before the other could ascertain the cause of her friend's alarm—for the outlaws were so effectually hidden among the bushes—Panther Tail sprung from his covert, leaped into the boat and seizing her dragged her ashore.

Half-paralyzed with terror the first captive could offer but little resistance and in a few moments Jaguar Jim had tied her hands and bound a handkerchief over her mouth. But the Indian girl did not submit so meekly. On the contrary, she fought like a wildcat—with all the ferocity of an enraged young tigress. But she could not overcome the brute strength of the powerful Panther Tail, and, womanlike, when she saw she could do nothing by physical strength she had recourse to her tongue. With a look of scornful disdain she threw herself up, clinched her little fists and with her black eyes fairly burning, she said:

"Go 'way! you insult me! I am Fawn-Eyes, the daughter of the great Stooping Bear, and she is Singing Bird, my white sister! You are cowards—you hide like the coyote in the bush and leap upon the fawn!"

Her words, however, had no effect upon Panther Tail and with the help of Jaguar Jim she was securely bound.

The villains lost no time in getting away with the girls, and to hasten their retreat they carried their captives in their arms.

Pushing their way through a fringe of undergrowth a few paces back from the river they emerged into more open ground. Across this they were pressing forward with their writhing captives when two men with drawn revolvers stepped from behind a rock and confronted the villains, one of them demanding:

"Halt there, you grizzled pirates, and drop them feminines like hot 'taters, or, by the ram's-horn o' Joshua, we'll tunnel your carcasses like a gopher-town! Don't you forget that I am old Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy, and this little toy tempest at my side are Banner Ben, the Prairie Wildfire!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A DESPERATE CONFLICT.

THE two outlaws, Panther Tail and Jaguar Jim, quickly dropped their captives and grasped their weapons, but they had presence of mind enough left to desist from drawing them, for they saw they were covered by the revolvers of Ben Bandy and Old Bandy.

Jaguar Jim was almost dumfounded as well as horrified when he found himself confronted by Banner Ben, who he had no doubt was dead in the bottom of the river. Nor could he scarcely believe that such really was the case—that the boy stood before him—until Ben addressed him thus:

"Oh, I know you're s'prised to see me, Jaguar James, on deck ag'in, but, by jeewhango, I'm on just the same, and now it's my turn to take a deal. Say, won't you please do somethin' to provoke me to shoot you? I could put the purtiest forty-caliber hole through you as ever leaked out a villain's life."

"D'ye hear that, critters?" put in Old Kit; "isn't that kid got a whole sand dune in his craw? Isn't he a multitude, though?—a toy tempest with volcanic symptoms? Say, gals, step 'round this way and consider yerselves the protégées o' Kit Bandy and Banner Benjamin."

The half-terrified maidens advanced to the side of the old detective who at once released them while Ben, with a pistol in each hand, kept the outlaws covered. As soon as she could speak, Fawn-Eyes looked up into Bandy's face and said, in good English:

"The pale-face man and boy are very brave. They have saved Fawn-Eyes and Singing Bird from the power of the bad Ingin and pale-face. Stooping Bear will honor you for it."

"By the horn o' Joshua! that sounds musical, gal—like a hull band o' angels, and I've a notion to shoot them varmints just for the fun o' it. But, gals, it's gittin' late, so you and your late escort, the magnificent Jaguar James, and the

superb villain, Panther Tail, will accompany us to our rendezvous where suitable quarters 'll be prepared for you until you be sent to whar you belong. Banner Ben, relieve them warriors o' their weepens."

This was a rather humiliating and trying thing for Jaguar Jim to submit to, but in the face of Old Bandy's drawn revolver there was no other alternative but certain death.

But the victory of Kit and Banner Ben was short-lived. Scarcely had they relieved the outlaws of their weapons before Old Tom Rattler, followed by Harry Ashmore, Bob Burch and four other men-hunters—who had fallen in with the party as they came up the river—came hurrying up the valley in search of them with the information that a number of red-skins—followers of Panther Tail—were in pursuit of them. And a savage yell close by confirmed it. A score of red-skins were but a few rods away.

"Boys, let's save these gals, Ingins tho' they be, or die!" cried Old Kit Bandy. "Harry, take the gals and escape to the river with 'em and we'll cover your retreat. Go, Harry—quick! there's a canoe there!"

"Come, girls," said young Ashmore, taking each by a hand, "I am your friend. Do not fear me."

Singing Bird, half-delirious, permitted herself to be led away, but Fawn-Eyes, stooping, picked up Panther Tail's tomahawk that Ben had cast aside, and then darted away toward the river like a scared partridge.

The next moment the outlaw-savages emerged from the woods and hurled themselves upon the old detective and his friends.

The red-skins' yell was answered by the crack of the whites' revolvers and rifles.

Bandy and his party could only act on the defensive against such odds, retreating toward the river so as to keep Harry and the two girls covered until they were out of harm's way.

Though unarmed, Jaguar Jim and Panther Tail's voices were heard above the din of the battle urging on the warriors to the destruction of the whites.

Poor Bob Burch and one of the hunters who had recently joined them, fell under the crushing blows of tomahawks fighting for their lives.

Back to the river's very brink the overwhelming horde of savages forced the little Spartan band.

Panther Tail, dodging like a coyote through the dense brush, slipped up behind Old Kit and seizing him about the waist flung him to the earth where a desperate struggle ensued.

Old Rattler, with Banner Ben at his side, dodged from tree to tree, and rock to rock, dealing out death to those who dared to approach them.

Meanwhile Harry Ashmore, with the girls, had reached the canoe and boarded it. Taking up the paddle he drove the craft out into the stream, but before they were four lengths of the boat from the shore five savages leaped into the water and swam like beaver in pursuit. Harry saw that he must fight them off. He took the tomahawk from Fawn-Eyes' hand and gave her the paddle. The foremost savage came within arm's reach of the canoe, and was in the act of grasping hold of it, when the hatchet in Harry's hand descended upon his tufted head with such force as to not only crush his skull but drive him under the water. Another savage came up on the other side and grasping the boat endeavored to rock its occupants overboard; but again the deadly hatchet fell, but missing the red-skin's head, owing to the motion of the boat, the weapon was driven to the eye in the wretch's shoulder, severing arteries and tendons. Blood spurted from the wound in jets and dyed the water round and about the boat. A second blow finished him, and then Harry made ready for the third.

The other red-skins, however, seeing the fate of their two friends, dropped back out of reach of the deadly tomahawk and set up a yelling to attract the attention of their friends on shore.

Immediately afterward bullets began to whistle around the heads of the fugitives from the rifles of those on land, and cries of "Halt!" and "Stop!" rent the air. But heeding neither bullets nor calls, Harry Ashmore again took the paddle and plied it with all his strength and skill, sending the craft fairly flying through the water.

Seeing the red-skins in the water were still following him, Harry finally handed the paddle to Fawn-Eyes and drew his revolver, determined to stop them. But, divining his intention, the red-skins dived under the water.

The firing at the fugitives was still kept up. It was quite evident that, at first, the foe had

no intention of killing them, but fired over and around them in hopes of bringing them to a halt. But when it was seen that the fugitives would escape, the bullets began to whistle closer, and, suddenly, a cry of pain burst from Harry's lips and he started half from his seat, but immediately sunk back again, with a stifled groan.

Singing Bird saw that he was growing pale. She saw blood ooze through his shirt and trickle down his breast.

"Oh, good friend!" the maiden cried, "you are wounded!"

Harry made no reply. His head fell slightly forward and with a gasp he sunk down lifeless in the boat.

With a low cry of anguish Singing Bird lifted the young man's head and pillowed it on her lap. She reached over the boat's side and dipping water in her hand, bathed his pale brow and temples.

A moment later the boat glided into the friendly shadows of the shore under great, frowning rocks; but as it did so a cry of the bitterest anguish and sadness broke from Singing Bird's lips, for she felt that she stood in the presence of death—that the spirit of the brave young stranger had passed into darker shadows beyond the river of life.

CHAPTER IX.

DOOMED TO DIE.

IN his struggle with Panther Tail Kit Bandy was getting the best of it, and had they been alone the cunning red-skin would have been defeated, but just at the moment of the old detective's hard-won victory Jaguar Jim came to the chief's rescue, and the tide was turned, and Bandy overpowered and taken prisoner.

The joy of the chief and outlaw was unbounded, notwithstanding the frightful slaughter of their followers and the escape of the girls. They were determined at once that he should suffer torture of the most excruciating character their brains could devise. Jaguar Jim reproached him for the trick he had played him and Redtop George the previous night, and gave him fair warning that he should suffer as many deaths as he and Panther Tail had lost men in the conflict just ended.

Old Rattler, Banner Ben and the other hunters had all disappeared from the scene of action, but whether they were dead or alive Old Kit knew not. He had every reason to think, however, that all but Banner Ben had been slain, for this gallant youth was the only one inquired for by Jaguar Jim and the chief. But altogether the situation was a gloomy one for Old Kit.

The Indians made great haste to depart from there. They were afraid that the sound of the battle might bring down upon them the warriors of Stooping Bear, and turn their victory into defeat.

It was a sore defeat for Panther Tail to lose the fair princess, Fawn-Eyes. With her he would have been willing to retreat into the fastness of the mountain and there gloat over his victory over his hated enemy, Stooping Bear.

The retreat from the battlefield finally began. Jaguar Jim and Panther Tail took Bandy in charge. The savages carried their dead off with them. Nearly every able-bodied warrior had a dead one to carry.

It was quite dark when their bivouac was reached. The dead warriors were hastily buried, and then the whole party mounted their ponies and retreated back into the mountains, taking Old Kit with them a living captive still. In a deep defile, known as Moaning Canyon, they came to a halt. The place was about ten miles from the river, and possessed great natural advantages as a place of defense. It was about twenty rods wide by about forty in length, oblong in shape, walled in by towering rocks, and entered only at each end by passages so narrow that three horsemen could not ride abreast. Some grass and several pine trees grew in the defile. A little stream of water rippled musically adown the pass.

A fire was at once kindled under one of the frowning walls. Its light shone out across the canyon and brought a hundred weird and grotesque forms and shadows.

A council was at once called to sit in judgment upon the old detective's case. The outlaws took their seats in the circle with the Indians. Nearly every man suggested some mode of punishment, and the fertile-brained Jaguar Jim and the spirited Bracelets as many as a dozen each. Each one vied with the others in suggesting the most cruel and atrocious punishment. For two hours they wrangled over the matter, and then were just as far from an agreement as when they began.

Kit was kept under guard out of hearing, and the old man's mental reflections were anything but pleasant. It is true, he had escaped death a hundred times, even when there seemed no hope. But this could not be so always. Had he been sure of Rattler being alive he might have had grounds for a faint hope even though the foe still numbered two-score and ten. But he could count upon nothing. The situation was, indeed, gloomy.

Nearly another hour had passed when the counselors seemed to have come to some decision, for the old man was taken about four rods from the fire, thrown upon his back, his arms and legs extended and tied to iron picket-pins driven into the ground. In this position he was perfectly helpless, and from remarks that he overheard he formed an idea of what his fate was to be, and made up his mind that his time to die had come. To him it seemed that nothing but the intervention of Providence could save him, and so his mind, like that of every other person brought suddenly to death's door, reverted to the past. Rapidly the events of his most eventful life were passing in review before him when suddenly his, as well as his captors', attention was diverted to a sharp, shrill voice down the canyon evidently engaged in a war of words with the guard on duty there.

"It sounds like a woman's voice," said Jaguar Jim.

And together he and Panther Tail hurried away to inquire into the matter.

In a few minutes they returned leading a sorry-looking mule upon which was seated an old woman in a faded calico dress, a red shawl that must have seen ages of service, and an ancient-looking sun-bonnet.

Every outlaw uttered an exclamation of surprise, and the facetious Bracelets stepping up to Jaguar Jim, asked:

"What under the heavens have you, Jim, a mountain fairy?"

"She's old enough to speak for herself," said Jaguar, in evident disgust and disappointment, on seeing in the light the sharp and wrinkled face of a woman of fifty.

"I thank you, Mr. Importance," the woman broke forth, pitching her voice in a high key and speaking most defiantly, "I'm no fairy, but a livin' sufferin' woman—a wronged and deserted wife that seeks the author of this wrinkled brow and this broken heart—the destroyer of my happiness and youthful beauty."

"Old gal," said Bracelets, "this seems to me to be a queer place to seek a balm for your wounded heart and a wrinkled-brow dispenser unless Jaguar Jim there, or one of these red-skins, or myself, for instance, could be your balm-of-Gilead—"

"Villain! monster! heartless wretch!" shrieked the old woman, in a voice that the echoes of Moaning Canyon mocked in elfin glee, "I'm a married female woman, now! Somewheres in the wide, wide world—yes, please gracious, in these very mountains roams the destroyer of my happiness and peace. But just to-day I heard of the monster in these parts."

"If you say so, old gal, I'll have these men all stand up in a line so's you can look 'em over, and if you find your balm-of-Gilead in our ranks you shall have him. But what's his name?"

"Bandy—Christopher C. Bandy," answered the woman.

A groan was heard to issue from the lips of the prostrate Kit.

"Great whaley! you Kit Bandy's wife?" asked Jaguar Jim.

"Yes, I am; and my name is Sabina Bandy, if you must know."

"Well, madam," said Jaguar, "permit me to inform you that your recreant lord, Kit Bandy, lies right over there flat on his back."

Old Sabina glanced at the prostrate form, then with a mingled cry of sorrow and triumph she sprung from her saddle to the ground, and running to where Kit lay she bent over him, crying out:

"Oh, Christopher! Christopher! Is it thus that I find you? Is not my warnin' comin' too true to you? Didn't I tell you that the judgment of Heaven'd fall upon you when I reproached you gently and wifelike for flirtin' with Marindo Stoodt? I reckon you wish now you'd taken my advice and not caused my heart to break. Oh, you owdacious man! I never ought to forgive you, and yet I've a woman's heart—a soft, gentle, bleedin' heart."

Here the outlaws burst into a peal of laughter. Turning upon them like a tigress at bay, Sabina screamed out:

"Laff, devils! hyenas! mock the woes of a poor old woman that's rid night and day—livin'

on a crust of bread and cup of water—for months to find her gallivantin' flirt o' a husband."

"Sabina, he's did 'bout his last flirt," said Jaguar Jim, "for we are goin' to give you a divorce, and if you'll call around in the mornin' with a box or bottle you can scrape up and save his ashes if you want them."

"Men—noble red-skins," exclaimed Sabina, in an humble, pleading voice, "give me up my husband and I will take him far away to earth's remotest corner."

"We're sorry, but your request can't be granted."

Sabina bit her lip, evidently to keep back an outburst of grief, and turning, she walked away to where her mule stood, took from the saddle an old beaded reticule, returned to the fire, and seating herself produced pipe and tobacco and began smoking, as she observed, to "stiddy my narves."

Her performances were a whole circus to the red-skins, who gave their attention to her entirely, thereby delaying the execution of Old Kit.

After she'd smoked a few minutes Sabina knocked the ashes from her pipe, and took from her reticule a bottle from which she drank a couple swallows, then rose and started back to her mule as if for something else, leaving her reticule on the ground by the fire.

Scarcely was her back turned ere an officious little half-breed Mexican, named "Tanza," seized the old lady's bag and proceeded to overhaul the effects therein. The contents of the bottle from which she had drank was rum, and Tanza finished it at a gulp, smacking his lips with a gusto. Then he drew from the reticule a dirty handkerchief or two, an old rusty dagger, some scraps of bread and meat, and, finally, a package wrapped in paper. In an instant the wrapping had been stripped off, leaving a curious-looking box in the half-breed's hand. He turned it over and over. He held it up and called the attention of every one to it.

"Reckin it's a box o' cosmetics," observed Bracelets, facetiously.

"Rip it open, Tanza," shouted Jaguar Jim.

Outlaw and savage curiosity had been aroused by Bracelets's and Jim's remarks, and all gathered around the smart half-breed, who soon began tearing at the box to get it open.

Sabina, who was watching him out of the corner of her eye, all of a sudden dropped down flat upon the earth. Scarcely had she done so when there occurred an awful, terrific explosion over by the fire. So terrible, indeed, was it that the very earth seemed rent into fragments and hurled into chaotic darkness, while down through the Egyptian blackness of space rained the dirt, dust and gravel of a shivered world.

CHAPTER X.

RUIN AND DESOLATION.

DARKNESS reigned supreme in Moaning Canyon, for the explosion of Sabina's package had swept away every vestige of the camp-fire. Savages and outlaws were hurled everywhere, and for awhile it seemed that no one had escaped death; but, finally, a moan was heard in one direction, and then another, as if coming from the legendary spirits that dwelt in the shadows of the grim old canyon.

Several minutes after the explosion Jaguar Jim recovered his senses, and crawling out from under a heap of dirt and debris peered around him. But he saw nothing. All was wrapt in Stygian gloom. The air was full of suffocating dust and a peculiar, sickish odor. From every direction, however, he could hear groans and cries like wails from the bottomless pit. But the outlaw's mind was confused. He could not tell whether he was upon earth or had been transported to his proper sphere in another world. He endeavored to collect his thoughts, and finally a vague recollection of the past crept into his mind. He recalled his having been in camp in Moaning Canyon, and the curiosity manifested by himself and friends in a package belonging to Sabina Bandy. He also recalled the fact that, while the package was being examined, a thunderbolt suddenly fell upon them, and from that instant on all was a blank. How many hours, days, months or years had elapsed since these events he had no means of knowing; but while meditating over the strange and mystifying situation, he heard a voice calling him. He recognized it as Bracelets's, and at once answered:

"Here, Bracelets, am I; where are you?"

"Right here, I guess," was the response; "but what's wrong, Jaguar? what's the matter?"

where are we, on earth or in Hades? What means them groans? what happened, Jaguar? didn't something bust?"

"Bracelets, old pard," replied Jaguar Jim, "you're dazed; I see now that we're right here in Moaning Canyon amid darkness, ruin and death—victims of an old woman's cunning. Don't you remember that package that that smart-Alec, Tanza, took from her bag? Well, that was a package of a new-fangled explosive called *nitro-glycerine*. I fully realize the fact now, and I hope Tanza does too. That package exploded in his hands—that's what's the matter with us."

"Oh, it is? When did the explosion occur? It isn't exactly clear in my mind."

"I can't say, myself, to the minute, but should say some time within the present year; but I'm goin' to try and strike a light and see what damage has been done."

He found his match-safe intact, and after groping about in the darkness some minutes he gathered a handful of dry pine needles and twigs and lighted them. The light revealed a fearful, ghastly sight. Near where their camp-fire had been was a great hole in the earth. The face of the overhanging rock had been shattered, and from under the heap of fallen spalls protruded the arms and legs of three or four red-skins, who had been hurled against the rocks and crushed to death. With the exception of these there was not a man within forty feet of where the explosion occurred. Some of them were almost stripped naked.

The stakes to which Kit Bandy had been tied down were still in place, but the old prisoner was gone—so was his wife—so was the mule.

A fragment of the officious half-breed, Tanza, was found on the opposite side of the canyon plastered to the rocks.

Panther Tail finally crawled out from under a dead savage and pile of brush some distance away, bruised and bleeding—a sorry and distressed-looking specimen of an Indian.

Fully half the crowd had been killed and wounded and their arms and accouterments scattered all over the canyon. Fortunately their horses were picketed out at the upper end of the pass else their casualties would have been still greater.

As soon as those who had escaped severe injuries had reported to camp a search for the rest was begun. The dead were buried and the wounded were wrapped and strapped to ponies, and then, while the night still lingered, the defeated and woefully dejected band took their departure for other quarters, and once more Moaning Canyon was given over to its fabled spirits.

CHAPTER XI.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE life of Ben Banner was doubtless saved by an accident which nearly cost him his life. He and Old Rattler had, during the fight with the savages, become separated from their friends, but fighting side by side with Spartan bravery, they contested every inch of ground with the foe. But forced by overwhelming odds to retreat, they did so with their faces to the enemy. They were driven back up the river onto a dark and deeply wooded elevation and while fighting there Ben's feet suddenly gave way beneath him and he sunk downward into a black abyss of unknown depths.

A cry of horror escaped Rattler's lips while the red-skins uttered a yell of triumph as the boy disappeared from sight.

The abyss was fully fifty feet deep and quite narrow. Its sides were festooned with a curtain of creeping, clinging vines. In these Ben became tangled as he went down and grasping them, his fall was broken and he landed, unharmed, at the bottom of the rift half-buried in a web of vines.

The savages stopped on the edge of the abyss and peered down into its dark depths, but they could see nothing. They listened but heard nothing, and to make sure he was dead they began to drop great stones into the chasms in hopes of crushing him. With a deep, hollow boom the missiles landed in the bottom of the rift, but ensconced under a projecting ledge, Banner Ben laughed at their futile efforts to crush him.

Finally, when the shower of stones had ceased, the lad crept out into the rift and began to wonder how he could get out of there. A thought struck him and he crept silently down the defile. He had to move carefully—feel his way at every step for fear of other pitfalls. He had gone but a short distance when he found that the abyss ended at the river's edge, the bottom being almost flush with the surface of

the water. Still there was no way of escaping except by taking to the river and swimming around to where the banks were low. To do this he would be compelled to leave his firearms behind, and this he regretted to do; but he was determined to get out of there, and so laying aside his rifle, revolver and cartridge-belt, and divesting himself of all his clothing except shirt and pants, he was ready for a swim.

By this time it was quite dark, especially in the abyss and along the river, and wading into the water, which deepened gradually, Ben was about to strike out when his attention was arrested by a faint sound like that made by the dip of a paddle. He peered into the gloom that hung over the river and listened. Again he heard the sound. It was the dip of a paddle beyond doubt, but it was on the opposite side of the river, and this fact convinced the boy that it was Harry Ashmore and the two Indian girls, and he resolved to cross the river and intercept them, or, at least, ascertain who was in the boat. So laying back in the water upon his back, with his hunting-knife between his teeth ready for instant use should it be needed, he struck out.

Noislessly as a shadow, almost, he glided through the water and in a few minutes had gained the shadows of the other shore, and resting upon the water he listened. He heard the dip of the paddle near. The boat was approaching, and, lying as he was, he could see the dim outlines of the craft and two occupants whom he made out to be the maidens, Singing Bird and Fawn-Eyes. The question at once occurred to him: Where was Harry? Had he left the girls to seek his own friends? or had they refused his further friendship and protection on reaching the shore?

While thus wondering the ripples from the prow of the boat rolled against his face, and he was about to make his presence known when a little cry of fear broke from the maidens' lips, and their boat came to a stand. And then he heard a voice say, in the unmistakable gutturals of a savage:

"Ugh! me catch young squaws—me drown them if scream—me big brave—me Cheyenne warrior—me Panther Tail brave."

"Oh, Fawn-Eyes!" cried Singing Bird, "he is one of our dreaded enemies!"

"But, by Jeewhango! miss, I'm one of your boss friends," said a voice on the other side of the canoe, and Banner Ben laid his hands on the gunwale of the boat and deliberately glared into the eyes of the no doubt startled "big brave" on the other side. "Now, you cussed terror"—the boy went on, addressing the savage—"let me see you spill these gals out of this boat and I'll split your ugly face wide open!"

"Waugh!" exclaimed the indignant savage, "me kill—scalp Little Devil!"

As he concluded the savage sunk in the water and dived under the canoe quicker than a flash. Banner Ben was expecting this and was ready for him knife in hand. They grappled in a deadly encounter and fought like two mad lions. Down into the deep water they sunk—rising again, their arms and legs beating the surface of the river into a foam around them.

Fawn-Eyes paddled her boat on a few paces out of reach of the combatants and again stopped. The maidens peered into the gloom, their hearts almost ceasing to beat so great was their anxiety for the triumph of their young friend.

But the conflict soon ended, and then they heard the victor swimming back toward them. Their suspense now was greater than ever, for they knew not which of the two had been slain, and filled with a vague terror Fawn-Eyes was about to dip her paddle and flee the spot, when the swimmer glided alongside the canoe and, grasping the side of the boat, exclaimed:

"Whew! it's all right, gals; I just dredged the river with that big brave. Gals, my name's Ben Banner."

"Oh, thank you! thank you, Ben Banner!" cried Singing Bird, in an ecstasy of joy; "oh, how I do wish I dare invite you to our village. Ben Banner is a brave boy; twice has he helped to rescue Stooping Bear's daughters from the warriors of Panther Tail. Singing Bird will speak well of you and your friends to Stooping Bear, and perhaps he will send for you to come to his camp in friendship."

"Thank you, Singing Bird, for your kind, grateful words; but the Sioux hate me. They call me Little Devil and hanker after my scalp; but that don't make me think any the less of you gals. I like a pretty girl and hope I'll meet you some time again, Singing Bird, when we can have a good, long, nice talk. But say, gals,

what became of the young man that helped you away in the boat?"

"The Cheyennes shot him and—"

"Hark, Singing Bird!" interrupted Fawn-Eyes, "some one comes!"

All listened and heard the dip of many paddles coming down the river, and dropping her voice the Indian girl commanded:

"Go quick, pale-face! many boats are coming! They are Sioux boats, and the warriors may kill you!"

"Oh, Fawn-Eyes! we will intercede for—" Singing Bird began, but the rest of her speech was lost to Banner Ben, for the frightened Indian girl dipped her paddle and the boat glided away.

"By Jeewhango!" mentally exclaimed Banner Ben, "that's 'bout as cool as this rollin' river. That poor Ingin gal don't know herself she's so skeered. She means well by me, but the idea of her folks killin' me after I've done what I have for them seems absurd; but there's no discount on that white girl, Singing Bird. By Jeewhango! I kind o' like her, for she's pretty as a fawn. But poor Harry! I reckon he was killed, though the girls did not say he was for sure. And the rest of the boys: I don't know whether I'm the only one alive or not; but, if so, I won't be long if that rag of Sioux find me, so I'll steam 'long down the river."

No less than half a dozen canoes filled with Sioux warriors were coming down the river not far away, and to escape all danger of discovery the young borderman swam off downstream keeping close in by the bank. He had gone perhaps forty rods when he stopped to rest under a great towering rock that projected over the river several feet. He crawled from the water and laid down upon a dry spot where the shadows were intense. He had been there but a few moments when he heard a sound that resembled a sigh of pain. It seemed to come from the rock behind him, and in a few moments later he heard it again plainer than before. In fact, it was almost a groan and was soon followed by a kind of a delirious muttering. There was some one in the rock back of him—some one whose labored breathing told of great pain and suffering.

Banner Ben at once made up his mind that there was a cavern running back into the rock, and that in this cavern was Harry Ashmore. At least, this conclusion seemed possible, and the lad at once determined to ascertain the facts in the case. Rising to his feet, and guided by the labored breathing of the unknown, he moved straight into the cavern; and as soon as he found he had entered it, he got down on his hands and knees and began crawling forward feeling his way with extreme caution through the darkness.

Before he was aware of his proximity to the unknown, his hand came in contact with something that moved, and then his ears were greeted by a voice distressed with pain, asking:

"Singing Bird—Fawn-Eyes, are you here yet?"

Ben at once recognized the voice as that of Harry Ashmore, and at once exclaimed:

"Great Jee-whango! Harry Ashmore, what's wrong here?"

"Ah! it's you, my dear friend, Ben," replied Harry; "but where are those noble, great-hearted Indian girls?—and the other boys—how did the fight come out, Banner? Did the girls send you here, Ben?"

"I'm sorry to say, Harry, our boys got licked in the fight, and I don't know whether any of them escaped alive or not. Them gals I met not far from here on their way to the village. They told me you'd been shot, but before they could tell me whether you were dead or alive, a noise interrupted us, and Fawn-Eyes, who's skeeryer than a fawn, pulled out and left me hangin' on the water like a shadder. But are you badly hurt, Harry?"

"Yes, Ben, shot through and through while crossing the river. I fainted before we reached here, but them heroic girls, God bless them, dragged me into this cave and bathed my brow and stanchd my wounds, and when I recovered consciousness they departed, promising to return as soon as they dare with food and their medicine-man, who they assured me would not betray my presence to the Sioux."

"By Jee-whango! it's queer they didn't say anything more to me 'bout you, but then they was skeered 'bout to death. But I am awful sorry, Harry, to hear of your bein' hurt, for we're in a bad shape. I'll do the best I can for you, pard. I'm here to die by you if need requires it."

"You are a brave, kind boy, Ben, and I hope I may live to repay you. It was to gratify my

wishes that you came into this perilous country. But, Banner, there are some matches in my vest pocket in a metallic case. I wish you would get them and see if you can strike light enough from them to examine my wounds. I was shot in the back, the ball coming out in front just below the right nipple, and I am suffering great pain."

Ben took the matches and struck one. In its light he saw Harry's bosom was saturated with blood and his face pale and pinched with pain. Before he could look further the match burned out. Striking another he looked around him in hopes of seeing something out of which he could make a more lasting and steadier light. In the niches and pockets in the wall he saw a number of nests of some gloomy-minded birds. They had been built of straws and tiny twigs, and being dry would afford means for a light. So Ben set to work and gathered them all in a heap and then applying a match to one of them proceeded to examine Harry's wounds, renewing his light at intervals with a bird's nest.

But after he had examined his friend's injuries he had no means of knowing how serious they were; and yet he was pretty well satisfied that, situated as they were without food, couch or medicine, nothing but a miracle could ever save him.

Ben dressed his friend's wounds the best he could, and then putting out the light sat down and talked to him. And if there is anything of a medicinal-healing nature to a sick man in the genial and social companionship of his attendant, surely Harry Ashmore received a full measure of this kind treatment in Banner Ben's never-ending flow of words that sparkled with whimsical wit and humor, and abounded with droll philosophy remarkable in a boy of his age and limited education.

And thus the hours were passed away. It was nearly morning before Harry closed his eyes in slumber, and feeling that there was no likelihood of immediate danger, Banner Ben stretched himself upon the floor of the cavern for a much needed rest and sleep. He soon fell into a refreshing slumber and slept until he was awakened by the sound of voices.

Springing to his feet he saw it was daylight outside the cavern, and even the gloom in the entrance to the cave was partially dispelled; but what startled and surprised him most was the presence, in a canoe in the mouth of the retreat, of two savage warriors, a white man whom he recognized as the renegade, Dr. Gwynn, and a young white girl dressed in the garb of an Indian woman.

Harry Ashmore was still sound asleep and, as the two savages were already advancing into the cave, Ben had no time to arouse him, so clutching his hunting-knife, the brave boy retreated into the darkest corner of the cavern and stood ready to die in defense of his own and Harry Ashmore's life!

CHAPTER XII.

RATTLER SERIOUSLY WOUNDED.

To be a successful border scout, Indian-fighter and mountain detective, a man must be possessed of a fertile brain, quickness of perception and decision, and strategic acumen that he may act upon the spur of the moment under all circumstances. These faculties Kit Bandy possessed to an eminent degree, and to them he was indebted for his life on many occasions; but when the old man found himself pinned to the ground, as it were, in Moaning Canyon, by a band of his most desperate enemies; his fruitful mind could conceive no way out of the dilemma, and he finally concluded that his time to die had come at last.

However, the arrival of his reputed wife, Sabina, put a different phase upon the matter and his hopes revived. But just what course she might pursue to effect his release he could not imagine; but as she had never failed on previous occasions to circumvent fully as wily a foe, he had no doubt but that she would be equal to the present emergency.

When the terrible explosion finally came, and the dirt, gravel and leaves began to rain down upon him, the old detective made up his mind that a Vesuvius had broken loose, and that he would be buried alive. But from amid the debris, however, he was finally dug out and his bonds severed, and as he arose to his feet in the Egyptian gloom, bruised and bleeding, his rescuer exclaimed in excited tones:

"Now, scat, Kitsie, you sinner!"

"Bless you, Ichabod—I mean 'Bina, bless you, ole gal," grasping his friend's hand, "but what on earth happened?—what bu'sted among them red and white devils?"

"Only a little package of *nitro-glycerine*

that I carried to use as a cosmetic for my complexion," replied Sabina, for she his deliverer was.

"Horn o' Joshua! it was a reg'ler volcano, and I war afraid I was goin' to be old Hercules himself; but my blood's got started now in my limbs, and I reckon we'd better make ourselves seldom in this gulch. Jewhiz! just listen to them howlin' varmints! This's Moanin' Canyon for sure now; but come on, 'Bina, ole gal."

So saying, they groped their way from the midst of the ruins to where Sabina's mule stood.

After Kit had given the old woman directions as to how to find their camp, she mounted her animal and moved away down the canyon while Bandy took a near cut on foot across the hills.

For two hours the old mountaineer swung along through the night at a rapid pace. The fate of his friends was all the time uppermost in his mind. He knew not whether a single one of them had escaped death, though he had every reason to hope that Harry Ashmore was alive.

He finally reached the valley in which the fight had occurred and was approaching the battle-ground when he suddenly stumbled over the prostrate body of a man from whose lips escaped a groan.

Gathering himself up he turned and, peering down at the unknown in the blackness of the place, asked:

"Who's here?"

"Ah! it's you, Kitsie, old pard."

It was the voice of Old Rattler.

"Yes, Tom; but what in the world's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"Yes; I was killed in that terrible fight," was the answer, given in a tone that told the old hunter was delirious; "and so you went under, too, Kit?"

"Why, no, Tom," Kit replied, kneeling by his old friend and taking his hand; "I'm afraid you're off, old pard."

"Kitsie, you hadn't ought to joke here," reproved Rattler, in a delirious tone.

"Tom, where do you think you are?" asked Bandy.

"In the other world, Kit; and how dark it is. I can't see you, pard. But how natural your voice is! Ah, me, Kitsie! if we'd had a little more regard for the truth on earth we might 'a' had quarters where there's a bit o' light in the other—"

"Rattler, I tell you we're on the same old mother earth where we war born."

"Ha! ha! Kitsie, you've the same old spirit, if you are a new-comer in these regions. So the other boys are not here, are they? Call Banner Ben, Kitsie; he may be near."

"Pard, you're hurt, and I'm goin' to carry you to camp. Let me lift you, Rattler."

Bandy lifted the old hunter in his arms, and as he did so Rattler cried out with pain.

But tenderly as he could Kit bore his brave old friend through the darkness over the uneven and almost unknown valley. It was a long and laborious tramp—a task the old detective could never have performed had it not been one of duty and affection.

But finally the camp which Kit and Banner Ben had left in the dusk of evening to make a reconnaissance in the direction of the Indian village was reached. And here another bitter surprise and disappointment met the old man. Of all the friends whom he had left there all were gone except Saybrook and Fisher, two of the four hunters who had joined them the day before as they came up the river, and these two were both suffering from wounds received in the fight.

It was not often that Bandy became despondent, but when he had looked over the situation his spirit became sorely depressed.

In order to examine the wounds of his friend Rattler it became necessary to strike a light, although it was dangerous to do so, for there were no doubt other foes abroad.

He found that Rattler had been wounded in several places, but the most serious was from a blow on the head, evidently made by a flying tomahawk, and the one that had stricken him down unconscious.

"I'm afraid Rattler's wuss than he seems," said the old detective, after he had carefully washed and dressed the hunter's wounds; "he's weak as a willow from loss o' blood, and that jolt on the head may produce inflammation o' the brain. But the brave old warrior's restin' easier now and he may come round all right."

Rattler had ceased his delirious mutterings and sunk into a quiet sleep. Old Kit, with the devotion of the Good Samaritan, sat by his side and kept his head wet with cloths dipped in a little spring hard by.

Saybrook and Fisher stood guard by turns until morning, and when the sun came up it dispelled much of the gloom from the hunters' spirits as well as from over the hills and valleys.

To Old Kit's great joy, Rattler awoke soon after daylight in full possession of his mental faculties, though somewhat weak and feverish. But all was a blank to him since he had fallen in the darkness, fighting, up to the moment he awoke. Kit told him of his finding him in the woods and carrying him to camp, and had a little laugh over the old fellow's delirious sojourn in the realms of darkness in another world.

"And didn't ye find any Ingins near whar I laid, Kitsie?" Rattler asked.

"No, nor I wouldn't 'a' found you if I hadn't stumbled over ye."

"Great Rosycrusians! pard, I wish you could 'a' see'd the work o' the tempest in that wood. You could 'a' walked from near whar I lay to the river on the carcasses o' the red-rinds that I destroyed. I shot the last one follerin' me dead after the hatchet that struck me down'd left his hand. But poor little Banner Ben! I'm afraid the boy is dead. He stumbled into an abyss as we fought on the retreat, and that war the last I see'd or heard o' him. Brave lad! I tell you, Kitsie, he was an untamed tempest—a lily-lipped hummer on a fight. But, Kitsie, do you s'pose that white Ingin gal war the gal you're lookin' for—Harry Ashmore's sweetheart?"

"It may be her and it may not. In fact, it are just mere suspicion that the disfigured Jessie Hampton, now in Kentucky, is not the true Jessie, and that the latter might possibly be alive and a captive among the Ingins. She may've been killed by the raidin' Cheyennes, but certain it is, if thar be a conspiracy the conspirators have put her out o' the way o' communicatin' with friends if they hav'n't killed her. It was in hopes that Harry might recognize the girl Jessie, if she the white gal was, that I sent him to help the girls away. But where's Harry now? is he dead? or alive and a captive in the Sioux village?"

"The good Lord only knows," replied Rattler, "but it'd seem queer for even a red-rind to hold a man a captive after he'd saved his life. But, Kitsie, what are we goin' to do here? It isn't very safe, is it, for us to stay round here?"

"I'm expectin' my wife, Sabina, all the time, Tom, and when she comes, if comes she does, she may bring some information from the Ingin village. I told her how to find our camp afore we parted last night."

"Ah! Kit Bandy, you old deceiver! that Ichabod Flea—your disguised Sabina—is an immense scheme—a gigantic deception. You'd been dead ages ago, Kit, if it hadn't been for that ever-present yet unseen spirit, Ichabod Flea. A glorious old deceiver and fertile-brained deceiver are that very Ich. And the fact o' it is, Kitsie, it begins to look to me as though Sabina—Ichabod Flea—did all the figgerin' and head-work while you did the fightin' and lip-work—that Flea's the key to Kit Bandy's success as a Mountain Detective—Ah! who comes there?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Old Kit, "'tis she, Sabina, my wife."

CHAPTER XIII.

STARTLING REVELATIONS.

WE will now follow Singing Bird and Fawn-Eyes back to the Indian village.

After leaving Banner Ben so abruptly the Indian girl paddled almost noiselessly up the river—so silently, indeed, that she succeeded in getting past the canoes of her warrior friends coming down the stream to investigate the sounds of the recent battle without discovery.

By a vigorous use of the paddle the girls finally came in sight of the villages, whose scores of lights twinkled like stars in the darkness, and a few minutes later they had landed and had entered camp.

Their absence had caused no particular uneasiness in connection with the sounds of battle heard down the river. It had been their custom of late to go up the river, and as no one had seen them go down the stream it was generally supposed they had taken their accustomed boat-ride up the river. The chief, Stopping Bear, however, questioned them closely about their prolonged absence, but with woman's tact they studiously evaded giving even a hint of the perilous adventure they had had. They had a kindly and Christian object in doing so. They knew the hatred of the Sioux for the whites, and that the decree of many a war-council had gone forth that the scalp of Little Devil—Banner Ben—should be taken, and it was not only

to save the life of the gallant youth, but also that of Harry Ashmore, whom they had left in the cave wounded, that they had adopted a course of silence in regard to the real facts of their evening's experience.

Singing Bird, the white girl, at once repaired to her own lodge, in a prominent part of the village. Her return was greeted by a young girl of about her own age whom she addressed as Rose. The latter was dressed like an Indian girl although she was white and decidedly lovely in face and form despite the uneasy expression in her great blue eyes and the careworn look upon her face.

The lodge was lit up with a rude stone lamp and furnished with no little taste and skill. The floor was carpeted with soft furs and the walls tastily decorated with a hundred and one little things such as would please a girl's fancy.

"My dear Birdie," said Rose, as Singing Bird seated herself upon a couch of skins, "I am so glad you have returned, for I have been uneasy, for some reason or other, ever since one of our scouts brought in the news that Panther Tail and his murderous outlaws were in these hills. But, Birdie, you are excited; what is the matter, sister?"

"Oh, Rose!" cried Singing Bird, in a low tone, "I have something dreadful to tell you; but Fawn-Eyes kept the secret from her father."

And as she spoke she arose and closed the entrance to the tent; then seating herself by Rose, she told of their capture by Panther Tail and Jaguar Jim, their rescue and flight with the young pale-face stranger whom they left in the cavern seriously if not mortally wounded, their second rescue by Banner Ben and their flight back to the village.

"But why did you keep all this from the chief, Birdie?"

"For good reasons, Rose; the young pale-face asked us not to tell our friends where he was. He was afraid they would slay him."

"What! after saving the chief's daughter?" exclaimed Rose. "Is that Indian gratitude?"

"I do not think they would harm him, but we promised him we would say nothing and we have kept our word because he is a brave and gallant man."

"Did he tell you his name?"

"No; nor did I think to ask him; but another thing, Rose: he looks ever so much like the picture in your locket."

Rose gave a little cry as if of sudden pain. Laying her hand upon Birdie's arm she asked with white, quivering lips:

"Birdie, are you jesting?"

"No, dear sister, I would not jest with you about one over whose memory you have shed so many tears."

Taking the locket from her bosom she handed it to Birdie, saying:

"Look at it closely, Birdie, and tell me if you still think the young pale-face resembles it."

"Yes," said Birdie, after looking for several moments at the picture in the jewel, "it resembles him very much."

"Oh, Birdie! what if it should be— But it cannot be—and yet I cannot leave here without knowing sure. Oh, if I could go to the cave and see him! Birdie, how can I get there before I go away?—but then you do not know, sister, that I am going away from here forever."

"Why, Rose! what do you mean?" exclaimed Birdie.

"White Medicine has at last prevailed upon the chief to release me from captivity, and tomorrow morning we are to start away."

"Oh, Rose! is that a fact?" cried Birdie, with unfeigned regret.

"Yes, and I wish you were going with me, sister," replied Rose.

"I could not go away and leave my father, Rose, who has cast his lot for life with the Indians; and even if I were going away I should not want White Medicine for a friend."

A sad smile flitted across Rose's face as she replied:

"Your dislike for White Medicine is very great, Birdie, I know; but he is very kind to me. I cannot think but that he is a good friend."

"Your great anxiety to get out of captivity may blind you to the real facts; but I hope, for your sake, that I am wrong. Oh, I shall be so lonesome when you go away! But, Rose, White Medicine is a great doctor, and if he is your friend, he will go with you to the cave and dress the young stranger's wounds and give him some medicine if you ask him to. We told the pale-face we would return and bring him food and blankets."

"Birdie, you are a bright, thoughtful girl, and I shall act upon your suggestion, and ask White Medicine to go and see the wounded man. We were to go away from the village in a boat down the river to the Willow Bars where we were to be met with saddle and pack-horses taken around through Snake Canyon. That would save a ride of fifteen miles to start with. But I will go and see White Medicine at once."

She arose and throwing a light Indian shawl over her head went out and away to the lodge of the Great Medicine. In a few minutes she returned, her face quite radiant.

"He has agreed to stop as we go down the river and dress the young stranger's wounds. I appealed to him in your behalf, Birdie; and exacted a promise that he would say nothing to any one of the presence of the stranger in the cave. I manifested no interest whatever in the wounded man, but ascribed my interest wholly to your wish to befriend the man who had saved your life. He said we would embark in the morning before daylight so as to reach the Willow Bars by sunrise at furthest."

Both the maidens seemed happier, although Singing Bird expressed a fear that the stranger might die, or would, at least, suffer great agony, before the doctor reached him. But as she could do no better she was compelled to submit to the pleasure of Dr. Gwynn, the White Medicine.

As it was to be their last night together the girls sat and talked, as only girls will, until after midnight when they retired for a few hours' rest and sleep.

Two hours before daylight the village was astir, and before long Rose's friends began to come in and bid her good-by, for it had become generally known that she was going away that morning on a long journey.

And finally the time for departure had come, and White Medicine called for Rose. Accompanied by many friends, they walked down to the river and entered the canoe that was to carry them to Willow Bars, where they would take to the saddle, horses having already been sent around through the hills to the place designated.

At length the boat pulled out in charge of two savage warriors, and dropped swiftly down the river. Rose was disappointed in that the savages accompanied them. This was a thing she had not calculated upon, and was sorely afraid that the two red-skins might deal foully with the wounded stranger, whoever he might be.

In the course of time the cave, whose location was well known to Rose, was reached and the party landed. The doctor took a small pocket-lantern from among his effects and lit it, and then advanced into the cave, Rose and the red-skins following him with apparent curiosity.

A few steps forward and the light fell upon a prostrate form lying upon the hard, stony floor.

"I'm afraid," said the doctor, "that we have come too late."

"Too late?" cried Rose. "Is he dead, doctor?"

"I'm afraid so," replied Gwynn, lowering the light so that its rays fell upon the face of the prostrate man. "Ah!" he continued, "I have seen that face before—saw it down the river but a few days ago."

Rose advanced, and leaning forward gazed down into the pale face of the man for a moment, then uttered a wild, piercing cry, and dropping upon her knees she sunk forward until her own face touched that of the silent form.

"Rose!" cried the doctor, in sudden surprise, "what does this mean, girl? Do you know that man?"

A low moan from the maiden's lips was the only answer he received.

Handing the light to one of the red-skins, the doctor stooped and lifted the form of the sorrowing girl from that of the prostrate man. As he did so the man stirred, opened his eyes and gazed around him in bewilderment, but did not speak.

Neither Dr. Gwynn nor the red-skins noticed, in their excitement, that the strange man had awoke—was alive.

"Good heavens, Rose!" cried the doctor, "what does this mean? Do you know that man? Answer me!"

"Go away! go away!" the girl shrieked.

"Rose, you are mad, crazy! come away from that body," the doctor commanded, and seizing her by the arm began dragging her toward the boat.

Uttering a shriek the girl fell in a swoon. A savage stooped and lifted her form in his arms and started with her toward the boat. As he did so a lithe figure—the figure of Banner Ben—

sprung from concealment in the shadows of the cave with a cry like that of a panther. He flew at the red-skin with the fury of a demon and drove his knife to the guard in the savage's breast, and then turned upon White Medicine.

But the doctor was a man of quick perception and quicker action, and before the young wildfire could touch him he dealt the boy a blow on the side of the head that sent him violently back against the rocky wall, where, striking his head against a projection, he fell half-stunned to the earth.

Staggering to his feet he gazed in confusion around him.

"Ben! Ben!" cried a voice, the voice of Harry Ashmore, "save her! save her, for God's sake!"

Ben rushed here and there in confusion, but soon he had collected his bewildered senses and ran down to the water's edge. But he was too late. The boat, with Gwynn, the maiden and the savage, was gone out of sight.

Stooping, the boy bathed his wounded head, and then hastened back to Harry, saying:

"Harry, they have escaped!"

"Oh, heavens!" groaned the wounded man. "Ben, that girl was my betrothed, the true Jessie Hampton!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WHITE MEDICINE IN A RAGE.

It was the fear that other friends of Harry Ashmore might be near that caused the precipitate haste of Dr. Gwynn in getting away from the cave with Rose. It was well, however, for both Banner Ben and Harry, for had the villain known certainly that he could have been master of the situation the lives of the young men would have been forfeited.

The doctor at once made up his mind that he had been the victim of the girl's deception. He believed that she knew before coming to the cave who the wounded man was, and that the whole scheme had been a plot to entrap him and release Rose; and thus believing, he flew into a rage and swore furiously at the red-skin, whose movements were too slow to suit him.

As soon as they were fairly out in the river, the Indian, who was paddling the boat, deliberately turned the head of the craft up the stream.

"Curse your stupid head, savage!" raved the doctor, "turn the other way! I desire to go on down the river!"

The savage ceased paddling, and looking White Medicine in the eye, answered:

"There danger down there—better go back to village."

The face of White Medicine grew black with pent-up rage. Like a snarling tiger his lips became drawn till his teeth showed between. Then, quick as the lightning's flash, he snatched a long, glittering knife from the belt he wore and plunged it into the neck of the savage.

The villain knew well where to strike, for the red-skin fell dead without a moan. Then lifting the body he threw it into the river, saying as he did so:

"There, curse you! Go to purgatory!"

Then seating himself he took up the paddle and turned the boat down-stream. He labored only as a desperate man could, but he was not a skillful boatman, and despite his efforts his progress was slow.

Finally, however, he reached the upper corner of a low stretch of valley on the left known as Willow Bars.

Here he pulled ashore and landed. Rose was still unconscious, but after bathing her brows and administering a restorative—he carried a small medicine case—she began to recover, and in a short time was in full possession of her mental faculties. Her first inquiry was about where she was.

"You are now at the Willow Bars, Miss Rose," the man said, in a tone tinged with sarcasm, "and I am expecting our escort every minute with the horses to continue our journey."

"Dr. Gwynn, why did you take me away from that cave?" the girl demanded, as her mind reverted to the incidents that occurred there; "what became of Harry Ashmore?"

"Harry Ashmore, eh?" he said, half-sneeringly; "so that was Harry Ashmore, was it?"

"It was; but what do you know of him, White Medicine?" the girl asked, in tones of deep surprise.

"I have heard of him," he replied, evasively, "but he is dead, Rose, and so you need not worry about him."

"But I shall worry—I shall not leave here until he has received decent burial. Dr. Gwynn, that man was my betrothed lover, and

I say I will never leave here of my own free will until he has had a Christian burial!"

"Your lover!" exclaimed Gwynn, with apparent surprise, "then he must have learned of your captivity in Stooping Bear's camp and is around here to effect your release. But it's all over with the poor fellow now— Ah! yonder comes our escort at last, and we'll soon be off. It won't do for us to tarry here for fear of falling into the power of Panther Tail's skulking followers. I will send one of them fellows back to camp and have Stooping Bear send men to inter your dead friend."

"I repeat it, Dr. Gwynn!" cried Rose, "I will not leave here until I have seen Harry Ashmore buried! I prefer captivity three years longer to going away without seeing him again."

"But, Rose, we will have to go, and that at once. We can't tarry here, for I tell you we are exposed to dangers."

"But I will not go! I will appeal to those men coming there!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing with a determined light.

"Humph!" Gwynn exclaimed with a covert sneer, "these men have positive orders from their chief and dare not disobey. You may as well make up your mind to go, for go you shall, and now."

"Dr. Gwynn, why do you speak in this heartless way to me?" Rose asked; "what do you mean by it?"

"I mean what I say; you have got to go now."

"I will not!" and she turned and with impetuous disdain walked toward the canoe lying upon the beach.

For the first time the girl began to mistrust the motives of the doctor—that all his pretended kindness and solicitude for her welfare was but a scheme to get her away from the Indian village and into his power. The words of warning as to the character of the man given her by Singing Bird seemed to have been truthfully spoken.

As she was about to step into the canoe, Gwynn sprang forward and seizing her by the arm arrested her movements.

The face of the girl grew livid with indignant scorn and her eyes fairly blazed with the fury of her outraged spirit.

At this juncture the doctor's friends came up. There were four of them—two white and two red men. Besides the horses they rode, they had in charge two saddle-horses and two pack-animals well loaded with equipage of one kind and another.

"Well, Doc, you beat us," said one of the white men, an old grizzly-bearded man with but one eye and a most villainous face, as they drew rein before the couple.

"And I'm glad you're here, Dead-Eye," replied the doctor, "for my lady protégée is getting rebellious and is beginning to long for her prison cage in the Ingin camp."

"Oh, pshaw! you're foolish, gal," said Old Dead-Eye.

"Oh, Dead-Eye!" cried Rose in appealing tones, "will you and the Sioux not protect me from this man's power? I only asked that our departure be delayed until a dead friend of mine near here could be buried. It will take but a few hours at most."

"She found a dead lover up here," explained Gwynn, as if afraid her appeal might be heeded, "and I objected to delay departure so long; but Cuba Dan there can return to the village and have the fellow interred."

"Won't that do just as well, miss?" asked Dead-Eye.

"No, I desire to see him myself," replied Rose. "Oh, Dead-Eye, do not turn against me, I pray."

"It'll have to be just as Doc says," returned the old villain.

Rose's heart sunk within her breast. She saw that she could expect nothing of any of those present.

"There's no use wasting time here, Rose," Gwynn said; "your horse is all ready to mount—come."

"I will not, villain! I will not!" declared the girl, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, but you must though," said Gwynn, dragging her toward the pony. "I shall waste no more time in words."

But Rose fought with all the power she could summon. Her woman's spirit was aroused and she resolved never to yield until forced to. But Old Dead-Eye coming to Gwynn's help she was soon overpowered, her hands bound, and then she was seated in her saddle and securely tied therein with a lariat.

Then the doctor mounted the horse brought

for him, and taking the reins of Rose's horse started off down the valley followed by Old Dead-Eye and the two savages.

Cuba Dan, the fifth man who had been ordered back to camp to please the whims of the girl, watched his friends until they were out of sight, then turned and rode slowly away in the direction he had come.

Nor were Cuba Dan's eyes the only ones that watched the departure of Doctor Gwynn and his party. From cover of a clump of willows a hundred yards away a pair of eyes that burned with the light of a consuming rage and passion had witnessed all that had transpired on Willow Bar. They were the eyes of Banner Ben.

Within five minutes after Gwynn had left the cavern the brave boy, stung almost to madness by the blow Gwynn had dealt him, plunged into the river, and swimming out into the stream from whence he could have a view of the river for some distance above and below, was enabled to see the course the fleeing villain had taken, and at once started in pursuit, having previously registered a vow in the presence of Harry Ashmore that he would trail the scoundrel down to death.

He kept close along the bank until he was enabled to leave the river, and as soon as he was upon land he moved along at a more rapid pace. But owing to the deviation of the path he was compelled to follow, Gwynn had so gained upon him that when he again came in sight of him—the doctor—the escort under Old Dead-Eye had already joined him, making the odds too great for the lad to attempt Rose's rescue, having no weapon but his trusty knife.

From his concealment, however, he watched every movement of the foe, and when he saw Rose being carried away against her will, it was as much as he could do to restrain himself from rushing out upon the enemy.

Another thing that added fuel to the flame of his wrath was the sight of his own pony, that had been taken from him, ridden by the man whom Gwynn had called Cuba Dan.

What to do the boy could not determine. Had he been mounted and well armed he could have decided upon some course of action: and when he finally saw all the foe, except the one on his pony, ride away, he quickly made up his mind to have his horse, and once upon its back he could follow the enemy to the utmost ends of earth. He was fully satisfied that the renegade would return to the village, and as there was but one way back, and that through the canyon they had come, Ben quickly saw that he must get in ahead of the fellow and attack him as he passed. So like a deer he sped away toward the mouth of the canyon, keeping well under cover of rocks and bushes. He reached the passage ahead of the outlaw, and ran on until he came to where the passage was quite narrow, where he stopped and secreted himself on a ledge overhanging the defile about ten feet from the ground. And there he lay like a young panther waiting for his prey.

It seemed so long before Cuba Dan appeared in sight that the boy had almost given up his coming at all; but when he found his patience was to be rewarded he summoned every energy for the contest.

All unconscious of danger, the renegade came swinging along at an easy gallop, but as he approached the narrow passage where Ben was concealed he slackened his animal to a walk. In another moment he was under the ledge, and then, with the lightning quickness that a hawk darts down upon his prey, the boy shot from the ledge and landed astride the pony's croup behind the renegade, around whose body he clasped his arms with the hug of a young grizzly, grasping his knife in his right hand.

Frightened by the additional load that had dropped so suddenly upon its back, the pony made a frightened leap forward, and its struggling burden, losing their balance, fell heavily to the earth, and then began a desperate struggle between the man and the boy.

The outlaw was taken at such an advantage that he could do little else than kick and flounder in vain attempts to release himself from the enemy's embrace. To and fro across the narrow passage they rolled—thrashing themselves against the rocky walls like caged tigers against the iron bars of their prison.

Ben held his knife in such a position that he could not use it to any advantage without releasing his right arm, and this he dreaded to do, through fear of losing the advantage he held in the struggle.

The outlaw succeeded in getting out his revolver and fired two shots back over his shoulder at his adversary, but both bullets went wide of their mark and struck the walls of the pass.

Cuba Dan was a much heavier man than Ben, and the latter finally began to realize that the struggle must bespedily ended or the foe would outwind him. So, gathering every energy for the final struggle, he watched his opportunity, and when it came he released his arm and, with a turn of his wrist, pushed the knife into the pit of the renegade's stomach to the haft, to which he still clung with an iron grip and arms rigid as steel.

The renegade dropped his revolver and endeavored to pull the knife from his body. He clutched frantically at the boy's hand, which he lacerated fearfully with his nails. But his efforts only served to twist the blade in his body and increase his dying agony, and finally he was seized with spasms of pain and died before Ben could scarcely release his body.

With the perspiration pouring from his face, his hand bleeding, and his body covered with dust and dirt, the boy sprung to his feet. Breathing a long breath of relief, he wiped his brow and gazed up and down the canyon. He saw his pony cropping some bushes about forty rods away. Placing his thumb and finger between his lips he blew a few sharp notes that reached the ears of the animal and at once brought it galloping down the pass to his side.

The trained beast seemed almost human in his manifestations of joy at meeting his young master, who talked to, and caressed him, with the genuine affection of one beloved friend for another.

After this meeting of the two old companions Ben appropriated the renegade's belt, in which was a revolver, every chamber of which was loaded. A second revolver he found on the ground with but two empty chambers, and thus armed he mounted his pony and galloped away down the canyon, his head bare and his unkempt hair flying in the cool breeze that drifted up from the south.

As he approached the river his ears were suddenly greeted by a voice calling from the bushes: "Banner Benjamin, ho, Ben!"

The lad drew rein for he thought he recognized the voice. Glancing in the direction whence the call had come he was rejoiced to see the tall form of Kit Bandy step from the bushes and advance toward him, his face aglow with radiant joy and happiness.

CHAPTER XV.

A RIDE INTO THE CLOUDS.

"HEAVENS be praised! Banner Ben dost live!" exclaimed Kit, as he advanced, and taking the boy by the hand pulled him out of his saddle and almost shook his arms off in his unbounded joy.

"My dear old pard," Ben said, "let me say the same by you; but what of the other boys, Kit?"

"Ah, me, Benjy," sighed the old man, "that was a dreadful fight. Poor Burch and two of them hunters that joined us the day before were slain on the battlefield. Old Rattler is over at camp somewhat banged and broken up. I left him with two friends busily engaged in engraving a monument sacred to the memory of Banner Ben. The old buccaneer thinks you're dead—says you fell into a chasm and war killed. Now, can you tell me anything 'bout Harry?"

"Yes; he's in a cave up the river seriously wounded; nor is this all, Kit; Jessie Hampton, Harry's sweetheart, has been found alive and well."

"Horn-blast that tumbled old Jericho! tell me something more that's good—go on; you're full of revelations as the Mormon Bible, Benjy!"

Ben briefly narrated all he knew of Jessie Hampton, the meeting at the cave, the fight with the foe, the flight of Gwynn and the girl to Willow Bars and from there on horseback.

"Then, by the Olympian gods!" exclaimed Bandy, "I must 'a' seen Jessie and Gwynn as I came up the river. I war not close to 'em, for they turned into Longhorn Canyon before they got to me. A white man and two Ingins were follerin' at their heels. Boy, that varmint is running that girl off. What shall we do to save her?"

"You go, Kit, and care for Harry Ashmore, and I will go bring that gal back. I'll foller them to British Columbia but what I'll have her out of that man's power."

"Oh, it's sinful, Benjy, that I hav'n't a hoss to go with you. It'd just be luscious fun for you and me to warp it to that gang; but if you go alone, Ben, be careful, for you'll have four against you."

"I know that, Kit, for I was in sight when they rode away. But I'm losin' precious time, Kit. They've now ten miles the start of me and

it'll be a long ride to overtake them. Oh, my! if I could only scale yonder high and cross over that mountain range, five miles' riding would take me twenty miles into the Longhorn."

And the boy glanced up the side of the mountain that rose on the right into the gray clouds of heaven.

"Lord, boy, you couldn't go up that steep afoot, to say nothin' o' ridin' up; but don't let me detain you longer. Go bring back the gal, boy, but be careful, and may God speed you."

Ben sprung into his saddle and waving a good-by to Kit was off like the wind, down the valley.

As soon as he had disappeared from view Old Kit turned and walked down to where Gwynn had left his canoe. He was about to step into the craft when a tiny bark with a single occupant glided into view from behind some willows and turned in to the shore where Gwynn's boat lay. The occupant was a girl. It was Singing Bird, whom Bandy recognized at a glance as one of the two maidens in whose behalf the battle of the previous evening was fought.

The girl was not at all surprised at Kit's presence for she had seen him before she came in sight, and recognized in him the brave old friend who, with Banner Ben, was the first to rescue her and Fawn-Eyes from the power of Jaguar Jim and Panther Tail.

Old Kit greeted her in a kindly voice, saying: "My dear gal, ar'n't you afraid to venture down this way ag'in?"

"There is danger, I know, sir," she replied; "but I came to look for Banner Ben who, the wounded man at the cave told me had gone in pursuit of White Medicine."

"Banner Ben just rode away, my child, on the track o' that miserable white villain that's run away with Jessie Hampton. Ben's a brave and darin' boy, and if he ever overtakes that white physis he'll splatter him all over the hills. The boy's blood's hot and nothin' but Gwynn's blood'll cool it. But he's a Joe-dandy o' a nice boy, and if I war a pretty gal like you, miss, I'd love him till my flutterin' heart had bu'sted with joy."

Singing Bird blushed crimson. Her eye-lashes drooped and a confused smile that spoke plainer than words to Old Kit, flitted across her face. But before she could make any reply to the old man's remarks, there came to their ears a savage yell from down the river. It was immediately followed by the crack of rifles and the sound of flying hoofs.

Stepping into the doctor's canoe both Bandy and the girl paddled their boats out a ways into the river, then swung around to the shore again a few rods below and pulled in under some drooping willows that screened them, most effectually, from view.

"I'm awfully afraid that boy Banner Ben's met with trouble," said Old Kit with a dubious look.

"Oh, I hope not!" replied Singing Bird.

Parting the bushes before them they peered out across the valley. As they did so a low cry escaped the girl's lips, for she saw Banner Ben on his pony flying up the valley pursued by a score of mounted Indians—followers of Stooping Bear.

It was all Bandy could do to restrain the excited girl from leaping ashore. He had no fears of the red-skins harming her, but he was afraid the presence of the girl might jeopardize the life of the boy by detracting him from the course he had no doubt planned to elude the pursuers.

Ben was quite a distance ahead of the red-skins—a distance the old detective felt he would be enabled to hold with his fleet-footed pony. But a new danger suddenly appeared from another direction. Just as he was about to turn into Snake Canyon he discovered no less than thirty plumed warriors coming down the defile toward him at a gallop.

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy; "the lad's cut off! He can do nothin' now but come this way and take to the river. But, see! he turns toward the mountain steep! what does he mean? He must be mad! Great Lord! he dashes up the base o' the cliff! He means to escape that way, but the attempt will cost him his life!"

Sure enough, the young dare-devil had turned and was deliberately spurring up the steep acclivity, which in places seemed almost perpendicular. It was an undertaking that none but one driven to a last extremity for his life would dare attempt, and Bandy believed that the desperate boy had sought that means of death rather than fall into the hands of the exasperated savages.

"Oh, the wild, crazy boy!" the old detective

exclaimed, as he stood clutching the willows on either side of him, and gazing with fixed and throbbing heart upon the boy: "he's ridin' to sure destruction, gal, sure destruction."

For a short distance the mountain rose gradually, and a few of the savages followed him on horseback a little ways, but they were soon compelled to abandon their ponies and continue on foot.

The few savages in pursuit sent an occasional shot after the fugitives in hopes of halting the pony and causing it to make a misstep, which would be certain destruction to both horse and rider. Those watching at the foot of the steep kept up a yelling that made the mountains seem alive with screaming demons.

But all this confusion had no effect upon Banner Ben nor his pony, for on and on bounded the noble little animal—up and up the dizzy heights it carried its rider. At times it seemed to stand upon its hind feet so steep was the way before it, and its rider was compelled to lie forward upon its neck so close that the two seemed but one to the watchers below.

In breathless suspense Kit Bandy and Singing Bird stood in their boats, their eyes riveted upon the steed and its fearless rider.

Time and again the noble pony was seen to stagger backward as if exhausted and about to tumble down the acclivity, but imbued with the unconquerable spirit of its rider, and urged on by gentle words of encouragement, it lunged forward again—rising higher and higher on the mountains—growing smaller and smaller—dimmer and dimmer to the watchers on the margin of the river, finally disappearing altogether in the clouds that wreathed the brow of the mountain.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Bandy with a long breath of relief, "the young dare-devil has reached the top and is safe, and no red-skin'll finger his locks to-day. And my old heart drops out o' my throat and swings back into its proper territory. But what a ride into the clouds! No one on earth but Banner Ben would dare tempt it; and now, little gal, as I see a smile o' joy and happiness on your face, I know your silent prayers have been answered, and if you've any word to send to Banner Ben, the toy-tempest, I'll carry it to him in the strictest confidence. Many's the time I've been an old 'star-route' between lovers, and no breach o' fidence."

The fair girl, with her eyes still lifted to the mountain-top—eagerly gazing like a hopeful heart into the veiled future for a glimpse of its idol, softly answered:

"I have no message to send him now."

"All hunky, Singing Bird," Kit said, "but now, I believe I'd better pull out afore I git myself into trouble. I'll go up and find the cave in which Benjy Banner said that young feller that helped you gals away in the boat last night lay badly wounded, and I—"

"I will go with you," quickly said the maiden, and seating herself in her canoe she took up the paddle and sent the craft gliding up-stream. Old Kit followed in sight, for in spite of his most strenuous efforts, he could not keep up with her.

CHAPTER XVI.

A THREE-CORNERED CONFLICT.

AWAY through the mountain pass galloped Doctor Gwynn with Rose, followed by Dead-Eye and the two red-skins.

The canyon through which they were traveling led away toward the north at right angles with the course Gwynn had told Rose he intended to take. But after the doctor's brutal conduct at the cave where Ashmore lay, and at Willow Bars, she had become fully satisfied, beyond all doubt, that she had been deceived and her confidence betrayed, and that there was nothing, however bad and cruel, the man was too good to do. So the change in their course from the river valley eastward to the Longhorn northward, added nothing to her previous estimate of the man's base and deceptive character. But she reproached him as they rode along for his deceit and treachery, though her words had no other effect upon him than to produce a grim, sardonic smile. After she had exhausted her vocabulary of contempt the doctor said:

"Rose—Jessie Hampton, for by that name I desire to call you now, you have by inference promised to be my wife, and—"

"I deny the assertion, sir!" exclaimed the girl.

"You can talk that way now," said Gwynn, "since you have seen the face of your old lover, but I will not be trifled with longer. I have given up my position as White Medicine in the camp of Stooping Bear, and all to take you out

of your captivity, believing you were a woman with a true heart. But I can see now that you and Singing Bird were the conspirators, and hoped to entrap me by getting me to visit that dead man in the cave. No, it is I that should be the one to complain."

"Be that as it may, I should prefer captivity in Stooping Bear's camp to freedom with you," declared the maiden, indignantly.

"Oh, I presume you think so now, but you'll get over that in time."

"Never! never!" cried the girl, vehemently. And thus they talked and badgered each other as they galloped along through the pass.

Years of captivity had developed in Rose a large degree of will-power and self-reliance, instead of a meek and humble spirit, and after she had recovered from the nervous shock sustained at the cave she betrayed a spirit that Doctor Gwynn saw could not be overcome by threats and provoking taunts.

The renegade doctor, however, was supremely happy in the triumph of his long-cherished scheme. He felt no uneasiness as he rode along through the lonely Longhorn.

They were fully twenty miles into the Longhorn and were riding leisurely along when, all of a sudden, six horsemen wheeled into the canyon from a side defile, and drawing rein before the doctor and party, and revolvers upon them, demanded:

"Surrender, there, you lopin' varlets, or we'll mow you!"

The man making the demand was the irrepressible Jaguar Jim. At his side was the notorious Panther Tail, Bracelets, the outlaw and three powerful Indian warriors.

Dr. Gwynn grew white and red by turns. A look of baffled triumph swept over his face, but he endeavored to conceal his emotions by addressing Jaguar Jim in a free, familiar tone.

"Jaguar James," he said, "you're up to your old jokes, ar'n't you?"

"Nary joke, Dr. Gwynn," replied the outlaw. "I've quit jokin' since I got into this bloody, matter-of-fact country. I'm in dead earnest in demandin' your unconditional surrender."

"What do you mean, anyhow, Jim?" was now asked in an appealing tone, for the doctor saw that the outlaw was in earnest.

"I mean that you have carried your jokes far as you can with the White Wolves. You're the very man that killed Capta'n Jubal Blood at Roarin' Rocks to save the secret of your little scheme which is now at an end, for we will take that young lady into our custody, and if there's any ransom to be had, I, Jaguar Jim, and Shiner Bracelets there'll take it in."

The doctor fully realized that he was in a desperate strait—that the odds were against him and that a fight could not be averted. But he was not a coward if he was a villain, and he knew Old Dead-Eye was a perfect demon in a fight, and if the Indians would only stand by them they might come out best in a struggle.

"Jaguar Jim," said the doctor, in an assuring tone, "you have known me long enough to know I'm no coward to be scared or bullied by any man that walks; and I think there is no need of trouble between us and our friends."

"Not a bit of it if you give up that gal, your arms and horses," replied Jaguar Jim; "these are our terms, and we can't modify them because we don't have to."

"They'll never be complied with. Fire, men!" cried the doctor.

And as he spoke he whipped out his revolver and fired at the outlaw, Jaguar Jim, whose arm fell shattered at his side.

A yell burst from the lips of each party, and then bullets and tomahawks began flying through the air and horses began rearing and plunging in affright as foe met foe in a bloody encounter.

A second shot from the deadly revolver of Dr. Gwynn tumbled Jaguar Jim from his saddle, but at the same instant Panther Tail seized the doctor and endeavored to tomahawk him, and in the struggle that ensued the two rolled to the earth between their ponies and there continued the fight with all the ferocity of enraged tigers.

A flying tomahawk knocked Old Dead-Eye senseless from his saddle, after he had killed a red-skin, and then victory seemed within easy grasp of Jaguar Jim's friends, when suddenly down the mountain-side dashed a horseman, revolver in hand, who drew rein in the midst of the combatants and began shooting right and left. Bracelets fell dead at the first shot. A savage went next, and almost as fast as one could count the revolvers of Banner Ben rung out, for Banner Ben the horseman was. Nearly every shot, though fired in haste and excite-

ment, told upon the ranks of the foe without regard to which side they were upon.

Finally one of Jaguar Jim's Indians, seeing the destruction the "toy tempest" was working among them, whirled his pony and endeavored to escape up the canyon; but as he was the only one of the two gangs remaining unhorsed, Ben gave chase and after a few rods' pursuit sent a bullet through the red-skin's neck, killing him instantly.

Meanwhile the maiden's pony had carried her beyond danger. At the very beginning of the fight the animal had dashed away up the canyon, and as her hands had been kept tied she could do nothing toward stopping him; but the hope of escape invigorated her mind and body with renewed strength, and with a desperate effort she succeeded in freeing her hands, when she soon got the animal under control, and stopping it, turned to see how the fight was going. As she did so she saw the mad horseman dash down the hillside and open fire upon the enemy. She saw the outlaws and savages tumble around him, and when the last savage—he who had attempted escape—had been unhorsed, she turned and rode toward the victor, the thought never occurring to her but that he was a friend and well-wisher.

Banner Ben's face was covered with dust and dirt and streaked with perspiration. His head was still bare, his hair hung in disorder about his brow, his shirt collar was open, and altogether he presented a rather wild and savage appearance.

He bowed to the maiden as she came up, her face white with fear and her mind in dire suspense, for she had never seen Banner Ben, and it had suddenly flashed through her mind that the dirty-faced, hatless little savage might be a new foe. Ben saw that her face wore a look of doubt, and said:

"Don't be frightened, miss, for I'm Banner Ben."

"Banner Ben!—you Banner Ben?" exclaimed the girl, her face becoming radiant with joy; "then you are my friend!"

"You can count me that way, Miss Jessie Hampton, till my veins have been drained of every drop of hot blood."

"Ah! and you know my name?" cried the happy girl.

"Yes, ma'am, Harry Ashmore told me who you was."

"Harry Ashmore? does Harry Ashmore still live, Banner Ben?"

"He does, miss, though it's an awful wonder Dr. Gwynn didn't kill him and me both when he war at the cave this mornin'."

"Oh, thank God! thank God!" cried the maiden, clasping her hands over her throbbing breast and lifting her streaming eyes toward Heaven.

"He's your lover, miss," Ben went on with a boyish frankness, "and he's an all-sloshin' nice young man."

"Then Harry recognized me when I was at the cave this morning, did he?"

"Yes, ma'am, he did and took on dreadfully 'bout you, but as soon as I recovered from the doctor's thump on the head I told him I'd go and bring you back and I'm goin' to do it or die."

"Banner Ben, you are the brave and noble boy that I have heard you were, and I will never forget your kindness if you conduct me back to Harry."

"I'll do it, miss, so let us ride down and make sure them villains are all fixed so's they won't never trouble you ag'in."

Side by side they rode down and stopped on the late battle-field. Banner Ben dismounted to secure such of the fallen foes' arms as he could make useful. He found Panther Tail and Jaguar Jim both locked in each other's embrace stone dead, and he supposed all the others were, but to his surprise, while relieving Old Dead-Eye of his weapons that notorious outlaw moved, uttered a groan and rolling over a time or two finally rose to a sitting posture and gazed around him in bewilderment.

Ben was in the act of putting him out of his misery when the maiden, forgetting the past, begged for the old man's life, and Ben put up his pistol and apologized for his act of cruelty in her presence.

A wound on the head was the only injury Old Dead-Eye had sustained, and as soon as he had fully recovered his senses he gazed up at the maiden and exclaimed:

"Confusion, gal! it looks as though a hurricane'd been wallopin' the boys 'round here, don't it? Which whipped, gal? Are we the only two that lives—heavens!"—this as he suddenly

caught sight of Banner Ben—"you here, Little Devil?"

"I should say I was," replied Ben, "and by jee-whango! I've a big notion to bang your old head off."

"Bang away, brat, for I reckon it'll have to come sooner or later, and feels as though a section o' it war chipped off now."

"You'd never have known you'd a sore head if it hadn't been for that girl," said Ben.

"Did she save my life?" the villain asked, in deep surprise.

"She did, and that, too, after you hounds had treated her so cruel."

"Well, God bless you, gal; that's more'n I could have 'spected—more'n I deserved from you; but since things have turned out so cyclonish I hope you'll git safe back to yer old Kaintucky home."

"Dead-Eye, what do you know about my Kaintucky home?" the girl asked.

"Lor', I knows a heap—I knows all 'bout your capture, and that you're the victim o' one o' the biggest and meanest conspiracy jobs ever hatched out o' a wicked brain; and seein' as what Cap Blood, and old Jaguar Jim, and Bracelets and Dr. Gwynn—the chief conspirators—are all dead, and I'm likely to have engag'ments elsewhere, I s'pose I'd jist as well divulge the hull thing so's I won't have to suffer for the sins o' the others. Doc Gwynn, there, was an awful mean and sly villain if he was your cousin, miss—"

"Dr. Gwynn my cousin? Impossible!" exclaimed the girl.

"You bet he's your coz., and his real name is Calhoun Darnley."

"One-Eye, you are jesting," declared the astonished maiden.

"Nary jest, gal."

"Old man," spoke up Ben, "don't trifle with that girl's feelings. If you have anything to tell, why tell it at once."

"Say, kid, you don't want to crowd on an old blind beggar like me," replied One-Eye, "and I'll git 'long faster. Now, miss, it's a Bible-fact that that dead scamp there, huggin' that dead coy-yote, Panther Tail, are Dr. Calhoun Darnley—the son o' your mother's sister, though you never knew him. He's the behemoth that hatched out the conspiracy ag'inst you that led to your years o' captivity, and why? Simply 'cause he knowed you and Harry Ashmore were goin' to git married some time or other. He said there was somethin' in your and Harry's father's will that give you all their wealth if you got married by a certain time; if ye didn't, then half o' your dad's wealth, which was half a million or more, was to go to Randolph Darnley, and as he soon died his heirs come in for the lucre. Them heirs were Dr. Calhoun Darnley and Miss Pauline, his sister, and they war determined to have the lucre, and to git it they began to plot against you and Harry. When you came west to visit in Kansas the golden opportunity was offered. Doc Darnley and his sister war livin' then, in the Ingin Territory, and so was I, and Captain Blood and Jaguar Jim. Doc had great influence with the Cheyennes, and takin' advantage of their ill-feelin's toward the whites, induced them to make that bloody raid through the Sappa Valley, when you were taken captive, and the Raymonds all killed. Cap Blood and his men are the fellers that captured you and carried you away, and by Gwynn's request presented you to Stoopin' Bear, whar you've been kept ever since."

"As soon as you war caged in the Sioux camp, Gwynn went there to live, and soon became the medicine-man o' the camp. He wanted to be where he could watch you and win your love, if he could, and marry you hisself. I went there, too, 'cause his sister promised to marry me if I'd do a certain thing, and after I'd done it, she kept puttin' me off from time to time and 'bout six months ago she died and—here I am!"

"Another person was taken into the conspiracy, and that was a gal that Pauline had picked up. She was sent to Kaintucky to personate you, and at last accounts she was holdin' the fort as Jessie Hampton to good advantage."

"Dead-Eye, that is impossible!" declared the maiden; "you are telling me a falsehood."

"Nary falsehood, Jessie," Dead-Eye replied; "you remember Annette Soules, don't ye?"

"Yes; she was a servant in our family up to within a few days of father's death," answered Jessie Hampton, as we will henceforth know her.

"Well, she's the critter that's livin' on the fat o' the Hampton estate, but she's a bad ghirl, Jessie. Annette was in the Ingin Nation with Pauline awhile afore you went West, and one

day she got cotched in a prairie fire and burned so horribly that her nighest friend couldn't recognize her. She was a horrid sight, and came near dyin', but Doc Gwynn, or Darnley, 'tended her and she got well. And Annette knowed everything, and more too, 'bout you and Harry and the wills, and lots o' your and Harry's little secrets, for while in your family she'd been very industrious 'bout pryin' into everything that 'forded her knowledge and pleasure. She read all o' your letters from Harry and a few o' yours to him, and knowed enough, she thought, to take your place at home and she's there now playin' her trump keards. You see she's so awfully disfiggered that no one can dispute her claim since you hav'n't put in your appearance. She tells 'em that she got burned on the prairie at the time of the Cheyenne raid. An old scamp named Rule, and claimin' to be a hunter, took the disfiggered gal to the commandant at Fort A—, and told him he'd found the gal nighly burnt to death next day after the raid, and that he'd taken her to his dug-out and doctored her up. The gal corroborated his story and gave her name as Jessie Hampton, and told all about her visit to the Raymond home, the Ingin raid, and a hull mess o' lies 'bout this thing and that. Kindly the officer in command escorted her back to her Kaintucky home and gave her into the keepin' o' your guardian who, I still understand, believes she's the true Jessie Hampton. To her lover, Harry Ashmore, she showed the gold ring he'd given you and some other things taken from you at the time o' your capture. Now, that old hunter, Rule, was nobody else than Old Dead-Eye, and Pauline was to 'a' married me for doin' what I did."

"But it seems Harry Ashmore got cranky, and went back on his sweetheart because she was disfiggered and her face all drawn and puckered up. He wouldn't believe it was her, and so rambled off and went to huntin' for the right gal. He went among the Cheyennes and all the other tribes where he thought she might be a captive, but no Jessie could he find. He hunted for Old Rule, the hunter, but he couldn't find him. He finally got Old Kit Bandy, that prince o' old snook-noses, to huntin' and it seems that he was the first to strike a clew, and jist at the moment o' his triumph, Harry Ashmore, the poor devil, Doc told me, was killed, and now lays—"

"Only he wasn't killed, though," interrupted Banner Ben; "I left him since Gwynn did, and he's far from bein' dead, and when he meets Miss Jessie he'll get entirely well."

"Well, I'll be danged!" exclaimed Dead-Eye, "if you're tellin' the truth, Bloody Ben, the thing won't be so bad for Jessie. But, Lor', it's been costive in blood for the boys. I reckon the hull outfit's dead 'cept me and Annette, and I reckon we'll go next, won't we, Miss Jessie?"

"You are Banner Ben's prisoner," replied Jessie.

"I'll run you down to camp, Dead-Eye, and hold an inquest on your case," Ben said, facetiously; "but, really, do you think you deserve to live, old sinner?"

"I never did deserve to live for anything, but I lived to deserve somethin', and I reckon it'll be the rope if Old Snooksy Bandy has the say-so."

"Well," said Ben, "I'll tie your hands the first thing, and then I'll help you aboard your horse and we'll pull out for camp."

Dead-Eye quietly submitted to be bound, which was done most securely by the boy. Desperate villain that he was, he appeared perfectly submissive and indifferent to his fate, but to make sure he had not a method in this, Banner Ben watched him all the closer.

Having secured the prisoner's horse and mounted him upon it, the boy tied the old scoundrel's feet together with a lariat passing under the animal's belly. Then Ben mounted his own pony, and with Dead-Eye in the lead and Jessie at his side the three rode along down the Longhorn leaving the dead outlaws and savages to the mercy of the wolves and vultures.

CHAPTER XVII.

REUNITED AND—THE CONCLUSION.

FOLLOWING Singing Bird Old Kit Bandy soon reached the cave and groped his way to where Harry Ashmore lay. The wounded man heard him approaching and recognizing his voice knew that deliverance from his dungeon had come.

"Well, my boy," the detective said, "I'm glad to find you alive and to waggle your warm paw again. How are you, anyway, Harry Ashmore?"

"Getting along well as could be expected under such trying and painful circumstances," re-

plied Harry; "but, my dear old friend, you folks had a terrible fight I understand and several were killed—among them my friend Burch."

"Yes, Harry, three were killed and not one o' the hull kit escaped injury, though me and Benjy Banner are the nighest bein' left together o' any. Old Tom Rattler came mortal nigh departin' this life. But that Ben Banner! I'll swear, by the horn o' Joshua, that he's a kid-tempest, and wasn't born to die. To-day I saw him ride up a cliff into the very clouds, where the savages on foot could scarcely foller, and at every bound that charmed cat-footed hoss o' his kicked back thunderbolts into the valley at the savages. Whether the boy rode on up into heaven I know not, but I feel sure that, when he descends to earth again, he'll give a good account o' the deeds done in the flesh. He told me that Dr. Gwynn had struck him a blow in this cave that nothin' but his life-blood would satisfy, and my 'pinion is the doctor's days are 'bout numbered. Before the lad soared aloft he told me all about you bein' wounded, the presence of Jessie Hampton here, and the escape of that delectable Gwynn with her into the mountains."

"But, Harry, the fu'st thing to be done now is to remove you to some place where you can get better care, food and sunshine. I have a canoe out here, and if you can stand it to be moved, I will undertake to do it—I will take you to our camp."

"All right, Kit; I am much stronger than I was."

Bandy, assisted by Singing Bird, removed the young man down to the water's edge and placed him in the canoe, and then both of them, bidding the kind-hearted girl farewell, started off down the river.

It was a dangerous trip, and no one but the risky and intrepid Kit Bandy would ever have undertaken it in broad daylight; but the old mountaineer had learned by experience that in the very boldness of some risks lay their safety. And this proved to be one of them, for, although the trip was a tedious one, he finally reached in safety a point on the river opposite their rendezvous.

Beaching his canoe, he took Harry in his strong arms and carried him into camp, where Rattler, Ichabod Flea, and the other two borderers, received them with joy.

Bandy at once set about dressing Harry's wounds, and while thus engaged a company of mounted troops were discovered moving up, westward, on the opposite side of the river.

Running down to the river, Ichabod Flea hailed them. The soldiers drew rein, when Ichabod crossed over in Bandy's canoe and held a consultation with Captain Carson, the officer in command. The soldiers had come into the hills in search of Panther Tail's band of marauding outlaws, but when informed by Flea of the almost total destruction of that band by the explosion of Sabina Bandy's box of cosmetics, in Moaning Canyon, the night before, the captain concluded to go no further and at once went into camp there, on the river.

By the captain's request Flea and his friends transferred their quarters to the soldiers' bivouac and Rattler and Ashmore were placed under the care of the surgeon of the company.

Kit then related the events of the past day and night to the captain, and finally prevailed upon him to send a squad of twenty picked men to follow Dr. Gwynn, in the Longhorn Canyon. But the soldiers had not been gone over two hours when they returned, accompanied by Banner Ben, Jessie Hampton and Old Dead-Eye.

Then, great was the rejoicing in that mountain-camp. The hills rung with the shouts, from the mountaineers' lips, and when Banner Ben told the story of the death of the outlaws, and the rescue of Jessie, the soldiers joined in with Bandy and his friends, and again the hills reverberated with prolonged shouts.

Banner Ben was the hero of the hour, and right nobly had he won the honors bestowed upon him.

The meeting of Jessie Hampton and Harry Ashmore was most affecting, and those who had been instrumental in reuniting them felt amply repaid for their labor when they saw how supreme was the joy of the young people.

The next day litters were constructed between two ponies for the two wounded men, Ashmore and Rattler, and the party began its retreat from the mountains. The journey was a slow and tedious one, but finally the fort was reached and the wounded men were placed in the hospital, where, of course, they received the best of care.

Jessie Hampton was the guest of the officers' good wives and daughters, for the maiden re-

fused to leave for her Kentucky home until Harry was able to go with her.

Old Dead-Eye was turned over to Kit Bandy, the detective, who, in turn, handed him over to the citizens of Roaring Rocks camp, where Judge Lynch soon brought his earthly career to a close.

In the course of three weeks the post surgeon pronounced Harry well enough to begin his homeward journey; so the day for his and Jessie's departure was fixed. But, before that time came, Old Kit and Rattler called upon the young folks and insisted that they should get married *before* they left the fort. The idea seemingly had not occurred to the young people, but, after due consideration they decided to act upon the suggestion out of respect for the old fellows who had risked their lives for them and their happiness.

So they were married in the fort, by the chaplain, and Kit and Rattler, who were ever overflowing with joy at the happiness of others, had the pleasure of wishing the young couple a joyous life, and in availing themselves of that old time-honored custom of kissing the bride.

When the day of parting at length came, Jessie said to her friends:

"One thing would make me happier, as I go away, and that is to know that Singing Bird's life is not to be worn out in that dreary savage camp. It is true, she has lived there all her life. Her father for some reason took her there when she was a little child, and there she has lived ever since. The poor child knows nothing of any other people or society. She was so kind to me in all the years of my captivity that I shall never cease to remember her in my prayers, and wish for her a better and happier life than that of the Indian woman and slave."

"Never mind, Jessie," said Old Kit; "I mean to have that gal away from that savage nest. To tell you the truth, Jessie, I'm in love with that gal, and—"

"Ho! ho!" laughed Rattler, "it's a Book-o'-Revelation truth that I never see'd the gal but that Kitisie was in love with. He's a monumental old fool 'bout the ladies, but he can't help it, poor old dude!"

"Rattler," said Bandy tenderly, "your mind still wanders. Don't agitate that great tubful of brains till you're strong, old pard, or you may be rumagin' around in Shadow Land again. But, as I war goin' to say, Jessie, I'm afraid Banner Ben and I'll be enemies hereafter."

"Why so?" exclaimed Ben.

"Oh, I hope not," added Jessie.

"You see," Kit went on, "Ben's *struck* on singin' Bird, too, and so we'll be rivals; but if Benjy draws the prize it'll be all right, for he's worthy of any gal that ever breathed the breath of life. A lad as can ride into the clouds, swim the deep, and cut up like a toy-tempest generally, deserves the very best the land affords. And the gal that love-lassoes Ben Banner for a life-part will have a banner husband."

With many tender words and tears of sadness Harry and Jessie took their departure, for their home in Kentucky, and upon their arrival there were received with a joyful ovation for the news of the finding of the true Jessie Hampton had preceded their return, several days. In fact, Annette Soules, the disfigured impostor, seemed to have been the very first to receive word of the discovery of her and Calhoun Darnley's conspiracy to defraud Jessie Hampton, and when search was made for her it was found she had been gone several days.

The marriage of Harry and Jessie fulfilled the requirements of their eccentric fathers' wills, and they entered upon a new life that was full of the promise of happiness and content.

Old Kit Bandy, Ichabod Flea—the irrepressible Sabina—and Tom Rattler returned to the mountains, for life to them was worth nothing unless in the midst of the wild whirl of excitement incident to border life and mountain perils.

And Banner Ben, the brave and fearless young Wildfire of the Prairies, turned his face toward the mountains too, for, as Old Kit had said, there was an attraction in Stooping Bear's village upon which the entire happiness of his future life seemed to center. But the hostility of the whole Indian camp stood a barrier between him and the object of his love, and before he gains that citadel of his heart's affection he must encounter obstacles and dangers that may again claim a record from our pen of the adventures of Banner Ben.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
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